

A Year and a Day

by LJ9

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1. Chapter 1

The vast majority of the things in this fic belong to Disney-Pixar, Dreamworks, and Cressida Cowell.

You could probably read this without having read either of the previous stories, but it'll make more sense if you have. This is about 96% movie-based, with 3% historical/linguistic factualness and 1% stuff I had to make up because there isn't historical record for some of the stuff I wanted to know about.

There are 25 chapters, but they're all fairly short and episodic. I hope you like it anyway. Thanks for the reviews, favorites, and follows from "A Distant Star" and "Stormerki."

* * *

><p>She'd deny it 'til her dying day, but as soon as the ship carrying him had passed out of sight, she went back to her room and cried. She could afford one day of being soppy and pathetic, moping around her room and then picking disinterestedly at her dinner. Her mum and dad exchanged indulgent looks, while her brothers mourned the absence of Toothless; she ignored them all, eventually trudging up to her room to stare out the window in the direction he'd gone.<p>

The next morning was a different story. She marched into the great hall, determined. "Right, Mum. Tell me everything I need to know to be a wife."

Her dad spat whatever he'd been drinking all over Hubert, who was overjoyed. Elinor huffed at them before turning to her daughter. "Could you explain what you mean, dear?"

"Well, I'm going to marry Hiccup in a year" "

"You're going to marry _someone_ in a year," her mother said diplomatically.

"so I have a year to learn about all the things that wives need to know. About running the household and why boys think things like that are so funny." She jerked a thumb at where Harris and Hamish were trying to get Dad to laugh while he was drinking so they'd get disgusting showers, too.

Mum shook her head. "That I cannot explain. I'm afraid no one can. I'll be happy to teach you other things, but I hope you're ready. Otherwise you will hate every second of it," Elinor warned.

"I'm ready. I haven't got any time to waste."

She hated it all the same.

2. Chapter 2

King Fergus' men had sailed with them from the lake to the sea and then northward through the islands, though these seemed to be different ones than on the trip down. From Toothless' back Hiccup had mapped it all as best he could; the more information he had, the easier it would be to make his way back. They had made camp ashore on the last island, then headed out the next morning, sailing due north. They hadn't stopped until the southern coast of Berk was visible against the horizon, even though he'd counted the days and insisted time and again that they could stop. Maybe it was curiosity, or maybe the king had let the sailors know that he wanted the princess' favorites to get home safely. Whatever the case they had seemed reluctant to see the pair go; after Toothless had delivered one last catch of fish he and Hiccup had waved goodbye and carried on alone.

Hiccup was thankful that the flight was so much shorter than the one to DunBroch had been. Toothless seemed fine, but he didn't want to wear him out. Once they'd made land they'd had a fight: Toothless had wanted to go on, but Hiccup thought they ought to spend the night, take it easy. In the end they'd compromised and rested for an hour before going on for an hour.

By late afternoon the next day they were flying into Berk. People shouted for them and waved as they landed outside the great hall. Stoick emerged from the hall and seized Hiccup in a tight hug. "Welcome home, son."

"Thanks, Dad. Everything okay here? No excitement while we were gone?"

He shook his head. "All quiet. Well, as quiet as it ever gets."

There was an impromptu homecoming feast in the great hall that night. Hiccup was forced to recount what had happened, though there wasn't much to tell. Unsurprisingly, everyone was most excited about the incident with the bear, and Toothless received much praise for his

efforts. Apart from that, what was there to tell to everyoneâ€”that at the feast she'd dragged him out to dance and it had felt like flying even as he tripped through the steps? That the first time he'd kissed her had been in the afternoon and his world had shrunk to just the two of them, her hand over his skittering heart, the heart she controlled? That she had basically asked him to marry her and he'd implied that he would? Nah, he could leave all that out. There was a feast, the queen found the dictionary (that he couldn't leave out, to Fishlegs' delight), they stayed for a few days while Toothless rested, they came home. Nothing that interesting. Nothing worth mocking him for the rest of his life for.

Afterward father and son walked home together, Stoick's arm slung around Hiccup's shoulders and Toothless padding ahead. The house looked the sameâ€”maybe a little less tidy, but fundamentally unchanged. Without meaning to his eyes went to the couch by the hearth, empty. He'd known it would be; he'd known that she wouldn't be there, that she was in her own home, but apparently part of him still expected her to be there. The house seemed dimmer without her there.

The next morning he went about his chores feelingâ€”odd. He couldn't really put his finger on it; there was just something off, and it wore on him, a strange tense itch between his shoulder blades. He walked down into the village, hoping to shake the feeling, but that made it worse. He understood every conversation he heard, whether he wanted to or not. It was so different from DunBroch, where every conversation had been full of words carefully chosen.

That evening Stoick watched him poke at the fire. "You've been quiet, son. Are you all right?"

"It's kind of weird being back. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to be home, but it just feelsâ€”"

"Weird?"

"Yeah. And it's weird that it's weird, because this is Berk, you know? It shouldn't feel like this."

"You've been away. Things always look different when you've come home again. It takes time to readjust sometimes."

Maybe he was right. Hiccup had only been back a day, after weeks abroad experiencing new things. It made sense that he wouldn't be able to snap back into village life when who he was had shifted slightly.

Then Stoick looked at him with the insight that always caught Hiccup off guard. "You must be thinking about Merida as well."

"I miss her," Hiccup sighed, fully aware of how pathetic he sounded. As long as it stayed between Stoick and him, he didn't mind. "We spent the last few weeks together, and being away from her isâ€”"

"Weird," Stoick finished with a smirk. Hiccup looked at his father, mending a sock, and wondered if he realized exactly how right he was. Being away from her made him ache, a persistent tug toward her. Was this the way Stoick felt without his wife?

"Dad, how did you know you wanted to marry Mom?"

Stoick smiled down at his sock. "There was never any doubt in my mind. She was the only one I could ever love. Everything about her was right."

They sat in silence together, both of their minds far away. Finally Hiccup took a deep breath and said, "Dad, I've got something I need to tell you. Part of the story that I didn't tell everybody else."

"That you're in love with Merida? I think everyone over the age of ten can tell that, son." Stoick smiled indulgently. Hiccup willed his face not to flush.

"Well, there's that," he conceded, "but then there's also the part where in about 350 days she's going to choose who she's going to marry."

"Ah," Stoick said, growing more serious. "Does she have suitors already?"

"Yeah, the sons of the clan chieftains. There's three of them. They're okay guys." He shrugged.

"Do you have an idea who she's going to pick?"

Hiccup steeled himself for Stoick's response. "I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure she's going to pick me."

He narrowed his eyes, frowning slightly. "But you're a Viking." Not too bad so far.

"The chieftains all agreed to honor her decision, no matter who she picks. They're really leaving it wide open for her. Us."

Stoick put the sock down. "What are you saying, Hiccup?" he asked, though Hiccup was pretty sure his dad understood what he meant. "You'd leave Berk forever to be the king of DunBroch?"

"No." He shook his head. "Not forever. It takes a while, but the sea route's not that bad." That was not the point and they both knew it. He met Stoick's eyes. "And I wouldn't be going so I could be king. I'd be going to be with her."

Stoick ran a hand over his head. He hadn't started yelling yet, but Hiccup wasn't sure this was any better. He was used to the yelling. He knew how to deal with it. This made him uneasy. "Hiccup, you've only known her, what, a few months? How do you know you'll feel the same way in a year? How do you know she will?"

"I can't speak for her, but for me, I just know." It sounded weak, for all that it was true.

"You love her that much, that you'd leave your village, your future, to be with her?"

"I've had a lot of time to think about the future recently, especially on the way back here. You know what my future looks like

without her in it? It looks likeâ€¦" He paused, trying to think of the best explanation of the bleak landscape he'd imagined. "February. A whole life of February." February was the worst month, the depths of winter. It was always grey and cold, though it warmed up enough for the snow to melt a bit during the day and churn into a thick mixture of mud and slush. Then overnight it'd all freeze again, leaving treacherous icy patches. February was something to survive through, not something to enjoy or celebrate.

"I don't want to live like that, Dad. I love Berk, but would I be the best chieftain? I'd try, but I'd never be as great a leader as you."

"It sounds like you've made up your mind already." He didn't sound disappointed, just tired, and that was almost as bad.

"I haven't. There's a lot to think about." Especially the fact that she might change her mind in the course of the rest of the year.

Stoick sighed wearily. "I won't pretend I know what's best for you, since you've proven me wrong time and again. Justâ€¦take your time."

Later he lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to plot the path of his life if he stayed in Berk. Teach people about dragons; come up with new inventions; maybe get married, if anyone would here have him, and have children; possibly get elected chieftain after his father. It wouldn't be a bad life. He would probably be able to do some good for the people, maybe not in huge ways, but little things that made their everyday lives better. He could be happy, or at least content. Or he could have been before. He wasn't so sure about it now.

What would life be like if he left? He didn't know for sure. He hoped that it would have her in itâ€¦not just in it, but next to him, every day. He would learn new things, explore a different country. They would have the worst children ever, too smart for their own good and stubborn, with freckles and reddish hair and light eyes. He would mess up terribly, get in stupid fights with her, and spend hours brushing out her hair to apologize; and if that didn't work, he was certain that they'd find other ways to make up. It would be an adventure, every minute of it. He knew which life he wanted to choose. He just wasn't sure if it was the right choice.

3. Chapter 3

"I think I'm dying, Mum."

"I can assure you that you are not. Keep stirring."

Merida was fairly certain that she was being steamed alive. When she'd asked her mum to teach her, she'd meant things like accounts, and diplomacy, and what to do if your husband snored like a sick boar. Elinor on the other hand thought that it was not enough for her to learn how to tell others what to do; she should learn to do the things herself, so that she never took the servants and their hard work for granted.

The queen had given the washerwomen the day off, and she and Merida had gathered the dirty laundry, checked that the pots were full of water, brought in firewood, and then stripped to their shifts to poke the clothes about their tubs. Merida was soaked through with sweat and steam, and they'd just started.

As the week wore on, she thought over the tasks they'd tackled together. Laundry was bad. Baking was bad; she liked punching the dough for bread, but not the endless waiting. Scrubbing the floors was infuriating, since without fail someone would walk across the section she'd just completed. Doing the household accounts at least engaged her mind. With the other chores it was too easy to think of all the things she'd rather be doing.

"Muttering will neither make the time pass faster nor the sewing go easier," her mum said serenely. There was more sewing to be done than there were hours to do it in. She'd never realized how many textiles two people needed. This, this was the worst: the endless yards of linen to hem, tablecloths, serviettes, curtains, pillowcases, sheets, and every stitch rebelling against her. Merida wasn't bad at sewing, but this was just so boring, and she didn't see the point.

"I don't think Hiccup cares about whether or not I hemmed all of these myself," she said. "Really, I don't think he'd believe me if I said I had."

"All right." Elinor set down her piece of work.

"All right?"

"You do acknowledge the necessity of sheets, yes?" 'Necessity' might have been a bit strong, but she nodded, curious about her mother's point. "And that hemming will help them last longer?" She nodded again.

"If you won't do them yourself, you'll need to pay a seamstress to do it for you. Have you got enough money saved up for that?"

"No, Mum," she sighed.

"Maybe you were expecting that someone would do it for free because you're the princess."

"No, Mum."

"All of the married women here sewed their things. Some of them are helping their daughters, like I'm helping you." She picked up her work again and started stitching. "Traditions don't exist just to keep us stuck in the past, or make extra work for us. They're a way for us to remember where we came from, to connect to those who came before, to show our respect. Taking the time to make these things will show your husband that you think enough of him to make an effort, especially at something you don't particularly like."

"Did you make all of your things, before you married Dad?"

"I did. My mother was adamant that I do them all myself. She sat and watched me, lecturing me on my wifely duties. It was appalling. If I hadn't been afraid of marriage before, I certainly was after listening to her."

"You were afraid? Of marrying Dad?"

"Not your father in particular—we hadn't met yet when we learned we were to wed. And some of the things my mother said certainly made me look at my father differently."

"Like what?" Merida asked in horrified curiosity.

Elinor cocked her head to regard her daughter. "Not everyone is as lucky as I turned out to be. Sometimes suitors show one face while they're courting and another altogether in private. My mother wanted me to be prepared for such a possibility.

"And I suppose I ought to warn you of the same thing. Not all men are as kind behind closed doors as they are when people are watching. Not all men are as good as your father, or as Hiccup." Out of all of them, Elinor was the best at remaining impartial, or at least pretending to, when it came to which suitor she preferred. But every so often she would let slip something that betrayed her preference. Merida smiled.

Elinor shook out the tablecloth in her lap briskly. "How's your nightgown coming, dear?" The nightgown was a nightmare. It was supposed to be embroidered with ornate knotwork in white thread on the snow-white linen. Why did something she was just going to sleep in have to be so fancy?

She groaned. "Do I have to do it? It's all that work that no one's going to see anyway."

"Your husband will."

How could she say things so calmly that shook Merida to the core? Being married meant, among other things, sharing a bed. She knew this, but it was one thing to know it and another to realize that she was going to experience it. When she was younger she'd sometimes crawled into her parents' bed to escape monsters or bad dreams; for years, though, she'd slept alone in her bed. What would it be like to have another person there? What if he snored—what if she snored? What if he hogged all the blankets in the middle of the night, leaving her cold?

They were silly questions if she was assuming the he was Hiccup. She'd watched him sleep before, wrapped in a blanket or nestled against Toothless' side; she hadn't told her parents so but she'd even slept next to him, both of them covered by Toothless' wing. It was all too easy to imagine sleeping next to him, waking up with his arms around her and the morning light on his face.

They would be doing more than sleeping in the bed, too. Merida wasn't completely clueless; she'd seen animals mating before, and some of the serving girls talked a little too much when they thought no one could hear their gossip. But there was so much she didn't know, and no one to ask but her mother. Would it be worth the mortification of asking? She wasn't sure.

"Merida, are you all right?"

"Does it hurt?" she blurted before she could stop herself.

"Does whaâ€" Oh," she said, catching the vivid flush on her daughter's face. Elinor reached out and took the cloth from Merida's hands, laying it aside carefully as she answered the question and the others that Merida was able to choke out afterwards. She hoped that she'd be able to stop blushing by the time she and Hiccup got to do what her mum was talking about.

4. Chapter 4

To be honest, he spent more time avoiding thinking about it than he did actually thinking about it, or at least actively thinking about. He couldn't avoid thinking about her; he missed her constantly, felt like there was something missing from every day that she wasn't there. Some days weren't too bad, and all he felt was a vague feeling, like he'd forgotten to do some small task before leaving the house. Other days it seemed there was a reminder of her everywhere he turned and it clawed at him until missing her was a physical pain.

On one of those days Stoick found him sprawled across the table, where he was supposed to have been sketching an improvement to the bellows at the forge. Hiccup felt his dad staring down at him; when he spoke, it wasn't what Hiccup had been expecting to hear. "Will you be miserable if you stay?"

He sat up as he considered briefly. "I don't know about _miserable_â€" "

"Because you'll do no one any good if you are. If your heart and happiness are somewhere else, how can you care about this place and do your best work for it?"

Hiccup reeled back at the sharpness in his tone as Stoick went on. "I know you'd still do fine work, no matter what work it was, but we don't need fine or acceptable. We need your best. And, Hiccup, if you weren't doing your best for us here, no one would be happy with the results, especially not you. I'm saying this not as your dad but as your chieftain: you need to decide, once and for all, and be done with it. Then we'll all be able to get on with what needs to be done." He crossed his arms and stared down at Hiccup.

It took a minute for him to process that. Then he gaped. "What, right now?"

Stoick nodded. "You've had plenty of time to think. Choose now, and for the love of Odin let's carry on with our lives."

He was right; they'd all dealt with Hiccup's waffling long enough. But to stay in his home, his family, or to leave it all behind for a new one? That deserved time.

Stoick interrupted his thoughts. "Now, or I'll decide for you. After five. One..."

"What?" Hiccup's eyes snapped wide. "You can't do that!"

He shrugged. "I'm the chieftain, making a decision for the good of the village. I certainly can do it. In fact, I should have done it

long before now. Two."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. "You're making it very easy to choose to go right now."

"So be it. But we both know this is too big a decision for you to base on spite. Three."

"Yeah. I'm sorry." He sighed. The chieftain was right. Berk didn't need a Viking who moped his way through his duties, wishing he were somewhere else. The village needed someone ready to fight and die for it without a second thought. That he'd spent so much time thinking about a life in another place, with another person, meant something.

"You're right," he said. "Stoickâ€"Dadâ€"I have to go. I _choose_ to go."

Stoick nodded. "All right. Sorry for the push."

He felt lighter all of a sudden, more at ease than he had in weeks. "No, thank you for that. It wasn't fair to anyone that I was acting like that. Especially not to you."

"It was a big decision. I'm glad you didn't make it lightly." He smiled then, though it was tinged with sadness. Doubt immediately returned to Hiccup's mind, but he tried to ignore it. The chieftain had said they had to get on with their lives, no more flip-flopping.

"Just out of curiosity, what would you have chosen for me?"

"What's best for the village," Stoick said matter-of-factly.

"And that's what, in your opinion?"

He smirked and patted Hiccup on the shoulder.

"No, really, Dad, what were you going to say? Dad?"

He walked off, laughing, and Hiccup sighed.

5. Chapter 5

Merida couldn't remember the last time her father had been so anxious. Surely he'd been like this when the triplets were born, though mostly she remembered the utter shock on his face when the third boy had appeared. This time he paced restlessly until Sona had delivered the last pup and they were all squeaking.

"Look at the wee dears," Merida whispered, leaning over the box. Truth be told, they didn't look like much just now, but that didn't make them any less precious. There were eight pups squirming beside their mother, all in shades of grey.

Fergus looked on proudly. "That's a good girl," he praised Sona. "Eight little ones, as lovely as their mum." The hound looked up at her master lovingly, licking her nose.

The boys were hard-pressed to wait until the pups were old enough to play with them. The day that their dad finally said they could touch the pups, they sat and let the little beasts climb all over them, tumbling about and yipping. "Have you picked which one you want yet?" he asked. Each boy held up a puppy, probably imagining the shenanigans they'd get in together. Merida wasn't sure if she was more hoping that they wouldn't get tired of their little hounds, or that they wouldn't find too much mayhem to bond over.

"Not exactly," she said when her dad looked to her; the truth was that one of them had picked her. Merida held up the pup to show Fergus. "It's a girl. So I won't be outnumbered by Hiccup and Toothless."

She hadn't come up with a name yet, though. The boys had already named theirs, CrÃ¹bh and Sgeot and Dubhar, but she had to think about it more. It came to her that evening as they all sat together, and she opened the dictionary, hoping the right word would be there. It was. "Bjarki," she pronounced slowly. Little bear. A name that he'd know, and a name that meant something to her family. "Hello, Bjarki."

"It's too bad you don't have any of Hiccup's things here," her dad said as she cuddled Bjarki by the fire. "She could learn his scent. That way he'd be familiar when he got here."

He believed without a doubt that Hiccup would come back. Merida treasured that and the warm glow in her chest that she got whenever anyone talked about a future with him in it.

"There's the kilt he wore still here," Elinor said, "though I don't know if I fancy letting a dog sleep on it."

She shouldn't have brought it up, then. "Oh, please, Mum," Merida begged. "Can we not just cut off a bit? I'd hate for her to be scared of him when he gets here." She poked out her lower lip at her mother. When that didn't work she held Bjarki up next to her face and directed the pup's head toward Elinor. The double dose of pleading eyes had to work.

"All right," Mum sighed. "But not too much."

She hadn't been in the room he'd stayed in since he'd left. There was nothing there to show that he'd been there, but it made her heart clench all the same. She longed for the days when he was only five rooms away, when a few quick steps would bring her to his door; or when he'd been just across the fire, or next to her leaning against Toothless' side. Refusing to let sadness grip her she set her shoulders, striding into the room and throwing open the chest at the foot of the bed. Neatly folded inside was the tartan and she sank to her knees.

Despite her determination, all of a sudden she felt empty. Was this all that was left of him here, this bit of fabric tucked away? There ought to be moreâ€"there ought to be some sign of him everywhere he'd touched. It wasn't fair that it was so easy for him to be forgotten, when he'd done so much, for her and her family and the whole of the kingdom. Everyone should be able to see what he'd changed. A hot tear slipped down her face as she pulled out the tartan and held it close. He deserved better than this.

Until he came back, she could make sure that no one forgot. And she knew where to start. She trimmed a hand's-breadth from one end of the fabric and replaced it carefully in the chest, then walked the five rooms down the hall to her own room, willing the tears not to fall, no matter how much she wished he was there.

"This is what Hiccup smells like," she told her pup, setting the strip of fabric in Bjarki's basket. "He's the kindest, most wonderful man you'll ever meet. You'll love him." _Just like I do._

* * *

><p>Notes:

Sona=lucky, happy

CrÃ¹bh=fang

Sgeot=shield

Dubhar=shadow, darkness

Bjarki=little bear

6. Chapter 6

They sat in the cove, the same place they'd become friends. There was no other place to have this conversation. "I'm going back to DunBroch," he said, without preamble. Toothless, sunning himself, looked slightly bored with that revelation. "And you're my best friend, and of course I want you to go with me, but I'm not going to make you. I can't ask you to leave your home and all of your friends and family to follow me to some strange place where you'll be all alone."

He squinted slightly, chin tipped down.

"Okay, you won't be _all_ alone; I'll be there, obviously, and Merida, and the triplets and the king and queen, but there won't be any other dragons."

He wiggled his earflaps close to his head.

"You saw their reactions. They'd obviously never seen any dragons before. Sure, there were drawings in the book, but who knows how old that was. They would have said something if there were still any dragons around."

He rolled his eyes a little, snorting.

"Yeah, I recognize the humans-don't-know-everything look by now. Okay, so maybe there are dragons somewhere around DunBroch. They could be wildâ€"

He opened his mouth and snapped his teeth out, a faint warning grumbling in the back of his throat.

"â€"By which I mean aggressive and unfriendly. I don't want to start

any trouble down there."

He laughed derisively.

"All right, any more trouble than I'm bound to start anyway. I'm not so sure I want you to come anymore."

He darted his tongue out, nose wrinkled.

"It's up to you. Whatever you decide, to stay here or to come with me, you have to choose. I'm already ruining enough stuff by going; I don't want to ruin your life, too."

He butted his head against Hiccup's torso until he had to hold on or be knocked over; then Toothless closed his eyes and sighed.

7. Chapter 7

She'd tossed and turned half of the night away, and finally Merida sat up, exasperated. She wasn't even thinking of anything in particular; she was just restless and fretful, and lying there any longer wouldn't change a thing. There'd be milk in the kitchens. That would help her sleep. She rose and padded down the stairs and through the silent great hall, wrapped in her robe; when she reached the kitchens her dad was there, having a snack. She slipped around him to the buttery, peeking into jugs for plain milk. Once she found some she poured it into a cup and joined her dad.

"Can't sleep?" he asked, sliding a plate of biscuits toward her. There were crumbs in his beard and his eyes were bleary; until he'd spoken she hadn't been sure if he was actually awake or sleepwalking.

She took one and shook her head.

"Anything you want to talk about?"

She was a bit surprised to find that there was. "What if he doesn't come back, Dad?"

"He will if he knows what's good for him," he grumbled.

"Dad."

He sighed. "Lass, I've no reason to think he won't come back. In fact, I'm willing to bet that he'll do everything in his power to come back to you."

Here and now it was cold comfort. "Tell me the truth. Will it be best for the kingdom if I marry one of the others? And don't tell me the lords have agreed to whatever I want." As he opened his mouth to give her some pat reassurance she repeated, more fiercely, "Tell me the truth."

He shut his mouth and finished chewing his biscuit before reaching over to her cup and taking a swig of the milk. She let him stall for time; she couldn't demand the perfect answer right away, not at this time of the night. He rubbed his eyes.

"You've grown so much these past few years. You were..."

"Selfish and childish?" she suggested dully.

Fergus shrugged one shoulder. "Well, you were a child. But now you're a young woman. You've learned so many lessons, survived kidnapping and ending up in a foreign land. You've changed, we can all see it."

"Changed for the better, I hope."

"Yes, love," he said patiently. "Before there was a little girl willing to risk war to get her way; now there's a princess who knows the best way to fight for what she wants, but also knows to ask whether or not what she wants is the right thing for all of us. _That's_ what the kingdom needs," he said, gently but firmly, as she looked up. "Not some daft lad who thinks he can charge in and protect you from danger, thus saving us all. DunBroch needs a princess, and a queen, who loves and dares and thinks. And if the man who marries her will help her with that, the way Hiccup does you, then the kingdom will be in safe hands."

"Thank you, Dad," she whispered. They stood in silence as she sipped her milk and he brushed away crumbs, trying to hide his presence.

Before he left he gave her a squeeze around the shoulders. "Feel better now?"

"A little." She tried to smile up at him, not wanting him to worry about her, not any more than he'd already had to worry, but she could only manage for a second before the smile slipped away. "I just wish I knew that he was going to come back."

"I wish I could promise he would."

If her father had his way, she'd always be safe and happy. But then again, if he'd had his way, she never would have been kidnapped in the first place, which would mean that she never would've met Hiccup. Sometimes she wondered what would have happened if she'd gone home when she was tired that day instead of deciding it was safe to nap in the woods. Would she have given in to one of the heirs and be married by now, Lady MacGuffin or Lady Dingwall or Lady Macintosh, living in a manor far away? Would any of them let her ride and shoot whenever she wanted, or would they expect her to stay at home, only venturing out by her husband's side? Surely they wouldn't; surely they understood and respected her enough not to deny her the solace of her favorite pastimes.

Maybe it was time to give some serious thought to which of them she'd pick if, for whatever reason, he didn't return. Her whole heart rebelled, calling her a coward for not trusting in him, as if the strength of her belief alone would be enough to draw him back. But that was her heart; her mind stood firm. It would just be a contingency plan. Better to think though it now, calm and patient, and not have to use it, than to be caught unawares on the day. Right. She sat on a low chair in front of the huge kitchen fire and stretched her toes toward it. _And no comparing them to Hiccup_, she reminded herself firmly. This would never work if she brought him into it.

Wee Dingwall was a funny lad, though often not on purpose. She didn't think it would be too kind to choose him (_as second choice_, her heart reminded her) if she'd be laughing at him the whole time and him not knowing why. For what it was worth, she supposed that Young Macintosh was the handsomest of them, and she wouldn't deny that she liked the clan's blue paint. She thought it would suit her. But someone as vain as he was would surely want a wife who was mostly decorative, and she was not made to be a statue. Young MacGuffin was shy and unassuming; she'd easily be able to ride roughshod over him, and while she'd be free, after a fashion, it wouldn't be any fun. Besides, he reminded her too much of Fishlegs. It would be hard to look at him without thinking of Berk and what she couldn't have. Macintosh or Dingwall, then? Macintosh might be less boringâ€”she could probably start some good rows with him, but then again she might kill him in his sleep. Dingwall might be easier to get on with, if she could manage to stay awake.

She fell asleep without having decided, and dreamed of her first and last and only choice.

8. Chapter 8

"You're _what?_"

Maybe telling them all at once wasn't the best idea. He wasn't sure he was any less likely to be murdered this way than if he told them one at a time. Their shock would have been comical if it weren't so insulting, though the insults were to be expected.

He managed not to recoil from the burst of question, though he rubbed the back of his neck. "Um, I'm going back to DunBroch in about a year. A little less, actually."

Snotlout cupped a hand around his ear. "I'm sorry, did you say you were going to marry someone there?"

"Is this a magical kingdom?" Ruff asked, waving her hands in an arc over her head.

"Does this girl really exist?" Tuff said, squinting at him.

"Who's going to be chieftain here?" Fishlegs wondered.

"One of you guys." Hiccup shrugged. "Whoever gets elected next. It was never a done deal that it would be me."

"This is stupid!" Astrid yelled, stepping in front of the rest of them. She stopped short of getting in his face, but it was inevitable; it'd happen eventually. "Hiccup, really? You're going to give up everything here to go marry some girl in a far-away kingdom?"

He knew he should let it slide, but he couldn't. "She's not just some girl."

"Do you looooooove her?" Hiccup stared levelly at Snotlout. He didn't know if he was completely in love with Merida, but he wasn't going to downplay his feelings about her.

Of course, that only left him open to more teasing. "You do! You totally love her!" Ruff crowed.

"You want to have her babies!â€"Wait."

Astrid was not amused. "Don't you care about what happens to Berk? Don't you care about us?" she demanded.

"Of course I doâ€" "

"So why are you leaving? Don't you want to be the chief?"

"I don't know. I guess I never really thought about it before. You know, back when I was a screw-up and everyone hated me?"

"Oh, we still hate you," Tuff assured him.

"Before I met Toothless, no one ever would have thought of voting for me. They would have voted for anyone, for a _fungus_ before me."

Snotlout shrugged. "I'd still vote for a fungus before you."

She ignored them. "You could do so much good. You have so many ideas and plans that you could use to help the village, and you're going to just give up."

"I'm not giving up!"

"It sure looks like you are," she snarled.

"Astrid. Is this about Berk, or is this about us?" At that Fishlegs started to herd the others away, despite their protests that they wanted to see the fight; Hiccup heard them making bets over how exactly Astrid would kill him this time as they went.

"What us, Hiccup?" she asked, strain in her voice. "I thought things had changed, once the war was over. You were different, more confident, more willing to stand up for yourself and go for what you wanted. I thought that was me, and I think you thought it was me, too. But you never chased after me as hard as you chased after the dragons, and you never fought for me or worked so hard for me or did anything for me the way you did for her."

"She was all alone, Astrid. She was lost and scared and she needed someone."

"Why you, though?"

"Because I was there!" He stood and started pacing. "I found her; it was my responsibility to make sure she was safe. What should I have done, left her in the woods for the raiders to find again?" She wouldn't suggest it, and she wouldn't expect it of him, either.

She shook her head. "No. You're right. It was the right thing to do. And getting her home safely was the right thing to do. But this isn't. You said it was your responsibility to make sure she was safeâ€"what about your responsibility to Berk? What about dragon training and taking over for your dad?"

Did she think he hadn't thought of that before? "There are other people who are qualified to do those things. I'm not the only one who knows anything about dragons, and I'm sure not the only one who can lead Berk."

"Okay, not the only one, but the best one."

He wasn't sure if she believed thatâ€”he certainly didn't. "Come on, Astrid." He threw up his hands. "You know who knows the most about dragons here? Fishlegs. He always has."

She waved away the idea. "Book stuff, but he couldn't have broken tradition and trained the first one."

"He couldn't have then, but he would now. He's changed, too. He's got the knowledge and the skills. And you know what else?" He stopped and turned to face her. "If we had to vote tomorrow for a new chieftain, I'd vote for you."

"Sure," she scoffed.

"Remember what you said to me back in dragon training when I was so awful? You told me that the war was coming to us, and I had to decide which side I was on. You never had to think about it once, because you've always been on the side of Berk. You know what's best for the villageâ€”it's like you can feel it. You'll fight for it, you'll protect it, you'll admit when you're wrong, if you ever are, and you'll fix anything that needs to be fixed."

That gave her pause, but she rallied. "I would have killed Toothless."

"But when you saw that he was good, that he could help us, you let your mind change. Yeah, you wanted to kill him at first, because that's what we'd always done. But you saw the evidence, and you acted based on that. Before the evidence had always been 'Extremely dangerous, kill on sight,' so you did. When the evidence changed, your actions changed. You're smart, and strong, and loyal, and absolutely terrifying. You're the perfect Viking woman," he said, smiling lopsidedly, "and there's no one else here I'd pick to be chieftain. Especially if you start studying with Fishlegs."

Astrid bit her lip hard, staring at him. He knew she didn't want to believe him, but he meant every word, and she knew him well enough to know when he was telling the truth. Finally she said gruffly, "You'd better not just be flattering me so I'll leave you alone."

"I wouldn't dare."

She suddenly deflated, now that the fight was over. "So you're really going."

"Yep." It came out far more flippant than he meant it.

"Hiccup..."

"Right. Sorry. She'sâ€”"

"What?" she asked sharply.

He looked at her, Astrid he'd known since almost the hour of his birth, the first girl who'd ever kissed him, the first person to believe in him, the fiercest young warrior on the island, and though he didn't want to hurt her, he knew she didn't want to be coddled. So he said, "She's like the sun. Everything is brighter, and warmer, and more alive when I'm with her. How could you want to live in a cave after seeing the sun and how amazing the world is in its light?"

She stared at him and he felt like an idiot. It made sense in his head; why couldn't it make sense when he said it out loud?

But Astrid said quietly, "And I'm the moon," and his heart broke for her.

"You're somebody's sun," he promised, though it felt more like he was trying to convince himself and not her. "There's somebody who can't live without your light. It's just..."

It's just not me, he didn't say, because they both knew that without either of them saying it.

9. Chapter 9

She was learning so much that she'd never even thought to ask about before. Now she knew that the head of all the weavers in the kingdom kept a huge, heavy, flopping book filled with swatches of fabric in different tartans, each one meticulously labeled with names and dates and complicated notes about dyes and numbers of threads. She turned the pages with interest; she could easily spot their family's tartan, and her mother's, and those of the allied clans, but there were many others she'd never seen before. She could easily spend all day studying the different designs, but the webster was waiting.

"You'd be able to design a new pattern if I told you what I wanted," she said.

"Of course, Your Highness," the woman said, a bit reproachfully.

"And then you'd put it in the book and have it noted down forever." She liked that, that there would be a record of it forever. "Right. This is what I was thinking..."

It took a few tries before the two of them got it right. Merida felt a little guilty for being so insistent, but this was important. It had to be as close to perfect as it could get. She didn't have a clear idea of what perfect looked like, but she felt confident that she'd recognize it when she saw it.

The webster brought a large swatch to the castle over a fortnight after their first meeting, looking distinctly less enthusiastic about the enterprise than she had when they'd started. She spread the fabric out for Merida to inspect. The background was green, the deep true green of the forests, crossed at right angles with thick black stripes. A red line ran through the middle of each black stripe; two shades of blue ran parallel to the each swath of black. "Yes," she said, satisfied. "It's just what I had in mind." The forests, the

ones that grew around Berk and the ones they'd trudged through together; the sea and the sky, Toothless and his tailfin, all there in the colors of the cloth.

"What shall I call it in the book, Your Highness?" the webster asked.

The simplest name was probably the best, and his home would always be part of him. "Berk," she said, stroking the fabric.

10. Chapter 10

The forge was relatively quiet when Hiccup walked in. The apprentices were stacking firewood just outside the door, and Gobber looked up from sharpening a spade. "Ah, look who it is. The future king."

"I see you've been talking to my dad." Hiccup poked at the fire until it flared.

Gobber shrugged. "It's not every day you hear your son's going to marry a princess. Can't blame him for sharing the good news."

"I don't think he thinks of it as good news."

"He'll be fine. Now, what can I do for you, Your Highness?"

Hiccup let the dig slide. Gobber had called him far stranger things before, so he wasn't going to take exception now. "It's more what I can do for you. Do you have any work that needs to be done?"

"I do, plenty of it. That's why I have apprentices."

"I need to earn some money so I can buy some things."

"Like?"

"Like a ship, and food, and clothes. I can't just show up in DunBroch empty-handed and expect them to provide for me. I need...stuff."

Gobber nodded. "Presents, too, I should think."

"Yeah. What can I give her parents? Should I try to take them sheep? What if I walk in with some sheep and, I don't know, some nice axes, and she picks someone else?" He dropped his head onto the countertop.

"A girl who chooses fine things over sheep and axes isn't a girl worth having." Hiccup glanced up, unsure how serious Gobber was being. He (sort of) had a point, though: Merida wouldn't be swayed by pretty, pointless gifts.

"You're right."

"'Course I am," he said, as if the thought of being wrong had never crossed his mind.

"Yep." Hiccup stood up straight. "I don't need riches to convince her to marry me. But what I do need is things that show I'm serious, and

that I respect her family. Gifts that are useful and well-made and beautiful."

"That's a tall order."

"Good thing I learned from the best." He clapped a hand on Gobber's shoulder, and the smith grumbled something about looking forward to Hiccup leaving. Hiccup grinned.

Together they came up with a list: a fine Viking-style ax for Fergus, a lantern, ornately worked with her name and a vine of flowers around the base, for Elinor, a little leather pouch for each boy filled with things for fishing, hooks and weights and line and a little sharp knife, and for Merida...

Arrowheads were useful, but the smith at DunBroch could make those. The boys had made her a knife, and beyond watching him throw one she'd shown no interest in axes. She had a bow from Berk. So what could she use?

He made her a goblet for feasting and a set of utensils, a copper pot and an iron one; he made a shield, thick wood and a gleaming metal boss, painted with a border of knots in blue and gold. He made a saddle that would seat two and a belt stamped with flowers that he remembered from the forest beyond the castle—he would make her a new flying harness when he could take measurements, since there was no sense in making something that she couldn't use because it didn't fit. He made her a golden ring, the best work of any kind he'd ever done, and he made a set of wooden combs, wide-toothed to fine, set in a little box with her name carved on the lid. The other things he would show to anyone, and she could display them from the top of the tower to all of DunBroch if she wanted, but the combs were special. The other things would convince onlookers that he was handy and clever and determined, but the combs couldn't convince her of anything that she didn't already know, and hadn't known all along.

11. Chapter 11

Elinor had enlisted Merida to help clean the boys' room and they'd stripped the linens from the beds, turned the heavy mattresses, scrubbed the windows and walls and floors. It only reinforced her belief that her brothers were disgusting creatures. Surely Hiccup had never been this bad, she thought, fishing out a shoe from beneath Hamish's bed. When she'd asked why the boys were not helping, as it was their room, Elinor had said, "I would like it to be cleaner when it's finished than it is now."

A thought came to her as she watched her mum fold clothes. This was the boys' room; her room was down the corridor; her parents' room was between them. There was the room where Hiccup had stayed, and other rooms for guests, but none of them seemed suitable for them to live in. Together.

"Mum? Where will we live once we're married?"

She kept folding, neatly separating the items into piles. "I expect your husband's father will provide you a place. Either a home of your own, or rooms in his house."

At moments like this she was never sure if her mother was willfully ignoring her plans or if she was just forgetting and answering the way things would be traditionally. She tried to be patient. "Yes, but _what if_ I decide to marry the one whose home is hundreds of miles away? We'll need somewhere to stay while we're here." She had the vague feeling that a newly-married couple should not sleep in one half's childhood bedroom, though she didn't want to voice that aloud to anyone, especially not her mother.

"The bride leaves her home for her husband's house," Elinor answered, still preoccupied.

Her husband's house? "Can he have a house here? I mean, can we?" She hadn't thought of it before, them having a house of their own; she'd always lived in the castle and hadn't expected to live anywhere else. But now that the idea was planted, it was growing more attractive by the moment. A house of their ownâ€”a home for them. A place where her brothers wouldn't be underfoot all the time, where he could feel like himself, not the stranger from afar and the rescuer of the princess (a title she tried to discourage, as she'd rescued herself, thank you very much), a place where Toothless could sleep in safety, a place where they could be alone together.

"You'll have to ask your father, dear."

She excused herself thenâ€”Elinor would hardly notice she'd goneâ€”and went to find her father. He was working with the pups, teaching them simple commands. At the moment they all sat, watching him intently.

"Dad?"

"Yes, my dear?" He tossed a bit of meat to each of them in turn.

Maybe she ought to have waited for his undivided attention, or asked if she could interrupt the training, but she was too excited about the idea her mum had given her to wait. "I know normally a bride goes home to the place her new husband has prepared for them, but in my case that might not happen. So where will we go?"

"Will he not be taking you back to Berk?"

"I don't know." It was one of the many things they hadn't had the chance to discuss. "I think he's giving up a lot to come back here, maybe everything. I want him to feel at home in DunBroch, even if it's only for a time."

"I don't suppose you'd be going anywhere very soon after the wedding anyway. It's quite a distance to cover."

That'd be no kind of honeymoon. "So will we stay here, in the castle?"

"There are plenty of rooms we're not using. Some of them could be cleared out." He tilted his head to look at her. "Unless you don't want to stay here."

She did, but she didn't. Above all, she didn't to upset her dad.

"This is my home, and I love it. But would you want to spend your honeymoon in the same building as your parents and your brothers? Your three troublemaking younger brothers?"

Though he blanched at the mention of a honeymoon, he had to agree. "You've got a point. Leave it with me," he said. "I'll think of something."

There was a farm not far from the castle whose owner, an old man whose only living relative had been a married daughter, had just died. She didn't want the place and didn't object to the king buying it. "It can be part of your dowry," Fergus said as they stood together in front of the house. Merida looked over it: it was on the large side, a proper farmhouse, not just a cottage; there was a kitchen, a sitting room, and a good-sized bedroom, with a garden and a byre out the back that Angus could stay in. The old man hadn't been able to take good care of the house, so there were leaks in the roof and other problems. It needed new paint and new furniture to fill it, but it would make a good home. She imagined a fire roaring in the hearth with a pot of stew above it and Toothless sprawled in front of it, her bows and quivers on hooks near the door, a vase of wildflowers atop one of the blasted tablecloths she'd yet to finish hemming with his sketchbook lying nearby, a couch by the fire covered with blankets and furs where they could cuddle on rainy nights. They could fill it with all the things they loved. But even if it was empty and cold, it would be her home as long as he was there.

12. Chapter 12

A branch snapped when she moved and the bear's head swung toward them. It snarled and lunged forward, and he shouted her name and tried to pull her back, out of the way of the slashing claws. She fired arrow after arrow into the bear but it didn't stop, only roared and swiped. She staggered backward and he caught her as she fell, hands over the bleeding wounds on her stomach. Her eyes were full of tears, staring past him into the sky beyond, and he held her close, arms around her shoulders. He became aware of a sound and eventually realized that it was his own voice chanting nonononononono. She tried to smile up at him, though it was more of a grimace, and reached up for his cheek with one bloody hand.

It was only a dream, he knew deep in his brain, though the terror felt real. He reached out blindly for her, her shoulder under its rough cloak or the mass of her hair, just to assure himself that she was there and safe. But she wasn't there, and he sat up, heart pounding, to remember that he was at home and she was at home and that there were hundreds of miles between them. He had no way of knowing if she was safe or not, if she was sick or hurt or lonely. All he had was the hope that she was fine and that he'd see her in a few more months.

There was no way he was going to fall back asleep now. He shuffled from his bed and down the stairs. It was just a dream. She's fine. She's asleep in bed because it's the middle of the night and that's what normal people do. He pictured her room in the castle and imagined her asleep on the bed, her hair spread over the pillow. He'd seen her asleep enough to know what she looked like: curled on one side, hands tucked under her head, lips slightly parted. He felt calmer picturing her like that, peaceful in slumber.

He dropped onto the couch and stared into the embers of the fire until they became her dancing, laughing, alive. Only then did he close his eyes.

13. Chapter 13

"There's something here for you, Merida."

"I don't want it," she said, not looking up from her sewing.

"Ooh, it's a mirror." As Elinor turned it this way and that, it reflected light around the room. "Look how lovely."

She wouldn't, just on principle. "Take it away, Mum."

"It's from the young Macintosh."

"Of course it is," she sighed. "Just put it with the rest of the things. I wish they'd stop; they all agreed to leave me alone—that is, to leave for the course of the year so I could decide without any interference."

"Bribery, you mean." There was a faint clink as Elinor set the mirror down.

"And anyway, I thought the lads agreed that we should marry whoever we want."

"Perhaps they do want to marry you, dear." Her mum sounded unconvinced and unconvincing.

"Thanks, Mum," Merida muttered. She didn't want to marry them, but she didn't want them not to want to marry her, either. "I bet it's the lords themselves sending them."

Elinor did not comment, but Merida bet her mum agreed with her. "Shall I read the letter with it?"

The letters were generally more amusing than the gifts themselves. She didn't want her to think she was encouraging anything, though, so she merely answered, "If you like."

"Dearest Princess Merida," her mum read, "It is my fondest wish that this gift and the missive that accompanies it find you and your most royal family in the best of health." (Young Macintosh was uncommonly fond of superlatives.) "I do hope that you will accept this trifle, unworthy though it be; it does not find its equal in either your incomparable charms or my most exalted regard for you. When you look at it, I pray you will think of me, your devoted and most ardent subject, Macintosh."

More than once she had entertained the idea that Macintosh was having them on, purposefully writing so floridly that they couldn't possibly take him seriously. She couldn't be sure, but it did more to improve her opinion of him than any of the gifts he'd sent.

"None of them have changed your mind at all?"

"No."

"Do you think if he had a way to Hiccup would send something?"

"I don't know. I wishâ€|"

"Yes?"

"I wish he were here. Not some silly mirror or a poem or any of this, just him. I miss him."

"Oh, darling, I know."

That evening she finished off the polite thank-you to Young Macintosh and signed her name. It was really more of a receipt, and she'd sent nearly identical notes in return for every present the lads had sentâ€"thank you for the lovely gift, you are too kind, hope you are well and regards to your familyâ€"but she had to at least acknowledge it or risk causing offense. And that was the last (well, second last) thing that she wanted to do.

She'd come to realize that she'd given the lords quite a bit of leverage over her. Yes, they'd seen that keeping her happy could be in their best interests, as no one wanted a queen who held a grudge against them, but now whenever they wanted something they could remind her of the sacrifice they'd made for her personal benefit. So far they'd not tried to press anything, but it had only been a few months; there was still plenty of time. She could never let herself forget what she owed them, and she'd have to anticipate what they might ask of her. She sealed the letter and laid it aside, then impulsively drew another sheet toward her.

The only person she wanted to hear from was the one who couldn't reach her, but that didn't mean she couldn't write something to him. It might be delayed a bit, that was all. She opened the dictionary and found the first word.

_Dear Hiccup, _

>I've just had another present from the Macintoshes, a mirror this time. It's beautiful, but the young one sent me something he'd want to receive, not something I'd want. And I don't want any of it, especially since every parcel shows how little they know me. Truth be told, I think the young ones are not trying all that hard on purposeâ€"they did all offer to give me up, and they're good enough lads to stand by their word. It's their fathers making them carry on, just in case.

>But there needn't be any just in case. As long as you're here, there's no one else. There's no one who understands me, cares for me, loves me the way you do. And there's no one I respect and admire and adore as much as I do you. I'm waiting impatiently for the day I can see you again and show you how much I've missed you.

Because it wasn't just infatuation, not after all these months. At first she'd thought that maybe her stubborn loyalty was refusing to allow her to consider any other man, and though that particular character trait certainly had a part in it, it wasn't alone. She wasn't just holding on to him to spite the other suitors, to prove a point, to assert her independence; she didn't think she was just in love with the idea of him, either.

And while she wouldn't deny that she missed his touch, his arms around her when she needed it most, his fingertips gentle against her skin, the sweet brush of his lips on hers and the resulting shock it sent through her that she hadn't had nearly enough chance to enjoy, it wasn't merely physical. He'd never touched her with anything but the purest intentionsâ€”if he'd done otherwise she would have broken his arm. No, she'd been the forward one, demanding comfort and only more when she was sure he felt the same. If all she wanted was a tumble she was sure she could find a man to oblige her, someone young enough to put aside rational thought and fear of her father's wrath in favor of a bit of fun, and with the princess, no less. But she wanted Hiccup, not just in her bed but by her side every day, to hold her hand through every celebration and to make her smile in every low time.

_Yours, yours always and only,
>Merida

As an afterthought she added _And love to Toothless as well._

14. Chapter 14

Gobber had hired him to make some protective gear for the apprentices, new aprons and gauntlets since they'd gone through a recent growth spurt. As he sewed, punching holes in the leather, Hiccup's thoughts wandered away to DunBroch, as usual. He wondered if the other suitors were honoring their agreement not to hang around Merida while she was deciding; then he remembered Lord Macintosh's sly expression as they'd agreed to it. From what he'd understood of the lords they'd at least be sending her presents, and though he knew Gobber had been right and they wouldn't change her mind, he still wished he had some way to reach her, to remind her that he was thinking of her all the time. Even just a pictureâ€”gods knew he'd drawn her enough, little sketches of her eyes, her hands on a bow, all the different ways she smiled, scraps that revealed how besotted he was and that were now safely hidden in his roomâ€”or a letter.

If he could write her a letter, what would he say?

Dear Merida,
>It's snowing. Again. You managed to visit Berk during a virtual heat wave. Now that it's winter there's not much hope of going outside without seeing your breath on the air (or getting hit by snowballs, for that matter). I hope you're warm, or at least warmer, in DunBroch. Not that everything is bad here; we have a holiday called Snoggletog coming up, and we have the dragons to keep us warm, literally. But the days are short and the nights are awfully long, and it's easy to go a little stir-crazy. I spend a lot of time thinking about you. Sometimes I look up and expect to see you in the house, sleeping on the couch in front of the fire. Thinking of you makes me feel colder and warmer at the same time: colder because you're so far away and I miss you, and warmer because you are warmth and light. I remember the sun shining on your hair, or how your lips tasted, or your laugh, and it feels like summer again, just for a minute. I try not to count the days until I get to see you again, because it only makes them pass more slowly, but it's hard. At the end of winter comes spring, and then I'll come back to you.

>Hiccup

Yeah, it was a good thing there was no way to send that. Writing wasn't really his thing. Now he didn't have to live with the embarrassment of ever having anyone else read it. But that night he wrote it out anyway, and spent the weeks to come translating it. She could read it when it was too late for her to back out.

15. Chapter 15

"What are you looking up?" Elinor asked as she swept into the room. Merida slammed the dictionary shut and shoved aside the papers she'd been making notes on. With any luck her face didn't reveal what she'd been searching for, things she hoped to call him some day: my lord, my husband, my love, my darling.

Based on what the dictionary had to offer, Hiccup's weren't a very affectionate people, but she knew better. Once they'd got properly acquainted, Stoick hadn't been afraid to make her feel cared for through his actions, if not his words. And though he might come off as awkward and aloof, if given the opportunity Hiccup could be very affectionate indeed.

Her mum was watching her now; she didn't want to admit what she'd wanted, but any attempt to fib would be obvious, so she muttered, "Just some...nice things to say to Hiccup."

Elinor smirked before quickly controlling her features. "To the lesson, then, if you please. Sometimes the safest way to ensure that your official correspondence is as you mean it to be is to write it yourself. For this your penmanship must be flawless. Take down what I read..."

* * *

><p>Sometimes he practiced with Fishlegs, tossing phrases back and forth on their way through the village, but besides that it was just as well no one understood the language. It gave him free rein to go about his tasks repeating words over and over for practice. He made lists of vocabulary by topicâ€"food, clothing, politics and history, family, cultureâ€"and murmured them under his breath throughout the day. Stoick grew used to the constant stream of foreign words accompanying meals and chores; Toothless listened as he always did, with varying levels of interest.<p>

He couldn't be sure of all of the grammar, or the pronunciation, or even some of the things he might need to say, but he had to make the effort. Hiccup knew he probably sounded crazy already, but if anyone had known that he was saying things like "How much for the cows?" and "No smoked eel" they would have lost any respect they still had for him.

Even so, some phrases he kept for the quiet times, for when he was alone and about to fall into sleep. He closed his eyes and pictured her and whispered them, warmth blooming in his chest as he thought of finally being able to call her leannan, m' annsachd, m_o chridhe.

* * *

><p>Notes:

leannan=sweetheart, darling

m' annsachd=my beloved

_m__o chridhe_=my heart_

>

16. Chapter 16

They celebrated a wedding in the middle of the winter, which helped brighten the dark months. His own future loomed large throughout the ceremony, and he wondered what weddings in DunBroch were like. Everyone would obviously be wearing their finest clothes (skirts all around in the south) and there would be decorations and music and feasting. That much he knew from his visit. But what did the officiant say? Where did it all take placeâ€”in the great hall, with everyone joining them, or in some quiet, private place? What promises did the bride and groom make to each other? Whatever they were, he was ready to swear them to her.

Just before midnight the new husband and wife were escorted to their home with loud singing and much teasing. Both were blushing, but happily and eagerly. "There'll be a new addition to the village come autumn," someone near Hiccup laughed, and his insides froze.

If Merida was going to be the queen, she'd need an heir. Any pleasant thoughts about theâ€¦process of providing one were eclipsed by the sudden fear that he'd do something to damage a child beyond repair. He had a _dragon_, for Hel's sake. He shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a baby, not even his own, and especially not an heir to a kingdom.

"What's the matter, Hiccup?" Spitelout asked. "Having second thoughts about marrying that southern girl now?"

Someone else chimed in, "Can't see why you'd even think of it, not with the quality of our girls. A Viking needs a strong wife."

"Well, maybe not Hiccup."

"No, especially Hiccup."

Gobber elbowed the men aside. "Let him be. I seem to recall a few of you having cold feet before your own weddings, and that was just to girls from the same village. Come on, you," he said, leading Hiccup, whose breathing was coming fast and shallow, away. Inside the forge he sat him down on a bench.

Hiccup stared up, wild-eyed, not really seeing anything. "Gobber, I can't have a baby."

"No, that's the woman's job. I thought even you knew that by now."

He shook his head urgently over the joking. "Can you imagine what I'd do to a baby? _Me?_" If anyone could understand the horror of the idea it would be Gobber, who'd witnessed firsthand the mayhem that

Hiccup's inventions and general Hiccupness had caused over the years. "I can't be a father. It'd end up insane or thinking it was a dragon instead of a person orâ€œ"

"Crippled?" Gobber's voice was dry, but it had an edge. Hiccup shook his head again, even though that was exactly what he'd been thinking. Slight maiming wasn't the worst thing that could happen, especially not to a Viking, but surely no parent wanted their child to end up with a metal leg, or interchangeable hands.

"You've got at least a year before you need to worry about a baby, anyway."

"A year? That's all?" he asked, yet more panic creeping into his voice. A year wasn't enough time. "I have to learn how to, to change a diaper and put on a diaper and hold a baby and I don't even know what else!"

"You've managed not to kill any of the baby dragons so far."

"Dragons are different. They're tough. Regular babies are all soft and squishy and breakable."

Gobber snorted. "Hiccup, I guarantee that whenever you have a child you won't ruin it. You might spoil it a bit, but you won't break it. And you won't be alone. You'll have Merida and Toothless and her parents to help. They've raised, what, three children?"

"Four." He forced himself to take a deep breath. "Merida, Hamish, Harris, and Hubert."

"And all of them are healthy and sane?"

He wouldn't swear to the boys' sanity. "More or less." The panic was starting to subside in the face of Gobber's relentless indifference.

"There, see? The king and queen'll help teach the pair of you whatever you need to know. And your own dad's been a good one, hasn't he? Maybe youâ€œboth of youâ€œhad a rough go of it for a while, but believe it or not, that's a common part of growing up. Is there anything wrong with you now?"

He shook his head, because there wasn't, not really. A few years ago he would've said that everything was wrong, that his father didn't care about him, that the village thought he was a loser and a burden, that he would rather have had any other parents than the one he had, that no one would care if he left forever. He had felt all that and more as he watched the others go to dragon training, watched people laugh and flirt and have friendships, watched families celebrate together. He'd felt like something was missing from his life. Ironical that now that there actually was something physically missing he felt more whole than he ever had before. His father hadn't caused him to lose his leg; if anything, Stoick had kept him from losing a limb any earlier in life. He'd been distant, unsure of how to relate to a son so unlike him, too rigid in his adherence to traditional roles, but he'd always cared about Hiccup and wanted the best for him, even when Hiccup hadn't been able, or willing, to see it.

"I'll not say being a parent is easy, but I've no doubt that when the time comes you'll manage fine. Until then, save your worries for things a little more immediate, eh?" Empathy expended for the night he pushed Hiccup out into the snow.

Hiccup wandered toward home, still reeling from the realization that he'd have to be a father, though he knew Gobber was right. He could worry about parenthood after he was actually married. The sounds of carousing echoed through the village, cheers and snatches of song winding up the hill as he sat on the stoop outside the house. Maybe it would be okay. Like Gobber had said, the king and queen had already raised a family, and they wouldn't let any harm come to their grandchildren. Besides, even Spitelout had managed to end up with a full-grown and basically functional adult in Snotlout, so there had to be some hope for him.

First he had to make it back to DunBroch, make sure she still chose him, and marry her. Then they could get to work on those children—though from what he'd heard, it wasn't what most people would consider work. He blushed, alone in the dark, as he thought about some of the things Tuffnut and Snotlout had said over the years. He didn't believe half of it; the others weren't much more experienced than him, though they liked to talk a big game. He guessed he'd find out what it was really like soon enough. Well, not soon enough, actually, especially not some days; some days he thought of her, of her hair tickling his neck or her voice as she breathed his name, and all of his insides throbbed, tight and twisting. He knew that he wanted her, that having her would ease the feeling, at least for a while. And while he wasn't the expert that Snotlout claimed to be on the subject of pleasing women, Hiccup had always been a fast learner.

17. Chapter 17

Sealed letter clutched in her hand, Merida hopped down the last few steps of the staircase and hurried toward the door, Bjarki at her heels. On her way out she nearly collided with her parents. Her mum looked her up and down, taking in the plaited hair and the note she held. "Where are you going, dear?" she asked with an understandable amount of suspicion.

Merida held up the letter. "I've got to deliver an invitation."

"To the wedding? There are invitations?" her dad asked. "I thought by now everyone just knew." Elinor patted him on the arm.

There was no way anyone who lived anything less than a day's ride didn't know all about the arrangement and the upcoming wedding by now. Still, in this case it was better to be safe than sorry. "I'm sure they do, but this is a special case."

Her mum frowned slightly. "You have to deliver it yourself?"

"Yes, Mum. It won't take long."

"Want me to come along?"

She patted the knife on her hip. "I'll be fine, Dad. And Bjarki will protect me, won't you, girl?" The hound yipped, wagging her tail.

Merida stood on tiptoes to kiss Fergus' cheek and then Elinor's before dashing out, calling "Back soon!" over her shoulder.

Angus circled the standing stones and ran on into the forest. There'd been no word of the woodcarver recently, and there was no guarantee that she'd be aroundâ€"she'd mentioned traveling up to Stornoway once, but who knew how migratory woodcarvers were? Merida had to make the effort to find her, though. She'd never said thank you before. Even if the spell hadn't turned out quite the way she'd expected, it had helped her, taught her, changed her. That deserved acknowledgment. And anyway, she knew from the fairy stories that it was always safer than not to invite the local woodcarver to an occasion as important as a wedding. Though in this case the invitation made it clear that no gifts, wooden or magical, were necessary.

The ruin in the clearing looked just as deserted as it had the last time she'd been there. Bjarki nosed curiously around the foundations, panting after the run, as Merida surveyed the scene. Surely the woodcarver would be able to retrieve something left for her there. Merida could still make out the threshold where it was nearly buried under a pile of rotting boards; she slipped the envelope between the wood and stone and turned to go. Before she reached Angus where he stood waiting there was the unmistakable creak of a door behind her.

"Beg pardon, lass, I've been screening my visitors more carefully of late." When she turned the hut was whole, again sodded over with grass, and the woodcarver stood in the doorway. "I came home from the Wicker Man festival to find my shop in a shambles and a tale of the queen turning into a bear circulating. Anything you can shed some light on?" She looked with shrewd eyes at Merida; probably nothing really needed explaining, not to a wise old woodcarver.

"I'm the one who ruined your shop," she admitted readily. "It was not my intention, and I apologize." She lowered her head to wait the woman's judgment.

The woodcarver hmphed. "I suppose you'd better come in and tell me about it." She turned back into the hut and Merida ducked to enter, though not before telling Bjarki to stay. The hound lay down just outside the door, head on her paws.

The room looked homey, cluttered with knickknacks. A kettle bubbled over the hearth; the crow perched on top of a cupboard. The woodcarver settled herself in a low armchair. "Serve us the tea, would you, dear?" Merida nodded and set to work finding cups and such as the woodcarver rustled the invitation. "I see you're to marry."

"I am." She smiled, pouring hot water into the teapot and adding nettle leaves and berries. A cupboard door flew open near her head, and she started back, whipping her head toward the old woman. She nodded at the cupboard; when Merida looked she saw a box full of biscuits. She pulled the box down and set it on the low table next to the woodcarver's chair.

"Anyone I know?" she asked, selecting a biscuit.

Merida shook her head, then reconsidered. "Well, I suppose it's

possible. Do you know of an island called Berk?"

"Can't say I do. Honey's in the pot. Your intended comes from this place?"

"Yes." She poured tea into a pair of mismatched cups and set one before the woodcarver, who sipped it and nodded approvingly.

"He's not a clansman, then? Not a great lord's son?"

Merida sat on a low stool. "A chieftain's son by coincidence, but not one of my father's allies."

"And the clan chieftains agreed to let you marry him?"

She nodded, though sometimes she worried that one of them would change his mind at the last minute and a battle would ensue, right in the middle of the great hall. At those times she tried to remember Toothless, and the thought of him restored her confidence. "They'd already agreed to let us—the heirs, that is—marry whomever we wished. They couldn't very well go back on their word just because I found someone who wasn't one of their sons."

The woodcarver studied her. It was a bit of a disconcerting stare, but Merida met it as levelly as she could, even though she felt like the woman was reading something written on the inside of her skull. Eventually the woman said, "Well, lass, you've made a good bargain and no mistake."

Merida set aside her cup. "I couldn't have done it without your help in the first place. If it hadn't been for your spell my mum and I wouldn't have come to understand each other better, and that led to the agreement with the lords and me being free to marry Hiccup. So thank you for all that."

She shook her head, earlobes wobbling. "I only helped you change your mum and told you how to change her back. You did the rest. You changed your fate yourself." She smiled at Merida, a kindly, snaggle-toothed grin that filled the girl with pride, even though she knew she hadn't done it all on her own.

"I'd better get home before my parents start to worry." Merida stood. "Will you come to the wedding, then?"

"Your Highness, I wouldn't miss it."

18. Chapter 18

This is the chapter where I must reiterate that this fic is based on the movies, not the books or TV show. It's also based on actual Norse tradition! Check out the Viking Answer Lady's article "Courtship, Love and Marriage in Viking Scandinavia."

* * *

><p>"Do we have to do this? I don't think we do. I mean, I'm not even sure I'm going to get married, and it won't be a real Viking ceremony if I do, so I think we can hold off on some of the traditions."<p>

"They're more important since you're not going to be having a Viking ceremony. You have to remember who you are."

"Dad?"

"I agree with Fishlegs, son."

"By 'agree with Fishlegs' you just mean 'want to see me suffer,' don't you?"

"I do," Snotlout answered.

"I totally do," Tuffnut added.

Stoick ignored them, clapping a hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "I had to find the sword of an ancestor before I married your mother and gave it to her to give to you. You'll do the same, and your wife will pass that sword on to your son."

"This sounds like a way to keep from having to make new swords. I do know how to do that, you know."

"The sooner you quit talking, the sooner you'll find it," Gobber said.

"Don't I get any hints?"

His dad tapped him on the head. "Think, Hiccup. When does a Viking stop needing a sword?"

Was this a trick question? Hiccup shook his head. "Never. It's one of the basic requirements for life—oh." There was only one place where a Viking would be with a sword he didn't need—that is, only one place as long as he'd left enough parts for a burial. Stealing from a grave seemed a little over the top and morbid, even for them. "Isn't that kind of disrespectful?"

"It's a tradition."

"It's a Viking tradition," Gobber clarified. "So yes and no at the same time."

"I guess I can't take Toothless with me?" He didn't hold out much hope for that, but it was worth a shot.

Almost as one they shook their heads. Of course not—the tradition predated their good relationship with the dragons, though he doubted anyone in the past had been able to take along a friend. This was meant to be a solo task.

"Now get going. We'll try to save some ale for you." They pushed him out the door eagerly and he stumbled into the soggy afternoon, Tuffnut calling "No, we won't!" from within the hall.

Well, at least he knew where to go. The track was less well-worn than others around the village. If Toothless had come with him, it would've taken a few minutes to reach his destination, but walking took much longer.

"Sooo, sword of one of my ancestors," he said aloud as he walked. "I guess it doesn't count as robbing a grave if they knew it was going to happen sooner or later?"

This struck him as one of the weirder Viking traditions. But if they were expecting him to prove that he was a man and ready to marry by coming back with a sword, then he was definitely going to come back with a sword. The others were probably having a good time in the great hall, drinking ale and cracking a few jokes at his expense. He couldn't find it in himself to mind much, though, and not just because he was used to it; he was (probably) the first of the group who was going to get married, and not just to someone his parent had picked, but to someone who (hopefully) actually wanted to marry him. Who had chosen him, even when she'd had other options. He figured a little pride was allowed at this point.

It was no use letting those doubts in anymore, though. For all this effort, he was just going to have to convince himself that he was her one and only choice. And if he got there and she'd changed her mind... He'd come up with something then. No use planning for defeat, right?

"Maybe I could fake my own death," he grumbled as he entered the burial grounds. No one came up here much; most Vikings preferred to remember their relatives as they'd been when they were alive and part of the life of the village. Hiccup peered at the runes set above the mounds, and the genius of the task suddenly struck him. Not only did he have to brave the weird atmosphere of the burial grounds, where wights might be lurking, to prove he could arm himself to provide for and defend his family, but he had to do it by proving he knew his family history well enough to take from the right grave. He could only imagine what ridicule—and haunting—awaited someone who came back with some other family's sword. He had a lot more respect for the tradition now.

On a rise overlooking the sea a barrow was set at a small distance from the others. "Hey, Mom," he said, kneeling by it. "Would you believe I'm going to get married? Nobody else really believes it, either—I'm not sure I believe it. I probably won't until I'm there and it's done.

"I wish you two could have met. I think you'd really like her. Not just because I like her; because she's amazing. She's stubborn and sweet and fun and passionate." He blushed, dropping his eyes. "And she likes me. Enough to stand against other people to fight for me. And she's a princess, Mom, an actual princess. Her dad's the king and he's just like Dad in some ways. I'm kind of afraid of what might happen if they ever meet. Her mom is smart and strong, and she has three little brothers, triplets. They're like the Thorston twins plus one, but with a better understanding of the debilitating effects of cooperation. And they live in a kingdom to the south called DunBroch where nobody wears pants, not even the guys." He sighed.

"It sounds like a fairytale—not in the happily-ever-after way, in the you-are-seriously-delusional-Hiccup way. But if I am delusional, it's a pretty great delusion, so I kind of don't mind." He shrugged. "I wish you were here, though, now more than ever. I have so many questions, like what should I do if she starts crying, and what's the one thing I should never say to her?"

"But I also wish you were here because I miss you, and I know Dad does, too. I don't want to leave him here all alone, you know?" He covered his face with his hands. "And I don't know if I'm being selfish and stupid, thinking that my own happiness is more important than anyone else's."

"I came here to get a sword, so I guess that's what I have to do." He stood and smiled down at the grave. "Love you, Mom."

As he turned, his foot clinked against something in the grass at the base of her barrow. He frowned and slid his foot forward, and again there was a clink of metal against metal. "Huh," he said, dropping to one knee again and running his hands through the short grass. There it was: a knob of metal sticking out of the ground, all but covered with grass. He scrabbled in the dirt, digging around the knob, which grew larger the more he dug it out. The knob was connected to a handle, wrapped in rough cloth. He dug a little more, as respectfully as possible, dirt packing under his fingernails; at the far end of the handle was a short crosspiece. Once that was free he grasped the handle, carefully curling his fingers around it, took a deep breath, and pulled. The sword slid out smoothly. When he held it up and examined it he saw etched at the top of the blade I belong to Hiccup, and a jolt coursed through him. But the sword was old, older than his parents; it had to have belonged to the second Hiccup, or even the first. He set the blade aside reverently and dug out the scabbard, its leather also wrapped in sacking. Once it was free he replaced the dirt as best he could, patting down the earth into the hole. Before he stood again he remembered what Stoick had said: I gave it to her to give to you. "Thank you, Mom."

19. Chapter 19

There were four months left, then three, then two. The time passed so unbearably slowly that it felt like a personal affront. Around her people went about their business blithely as she was going mad waiting. So she threw herself into the preparations, working from dawn to dusk at whatever she could with whoever would accept her help; if she had any free time she rode to the farmhouse and scrubbed the floors, patched holes in the byre, or wrenched weeds from the garden with manic energy. If it rained she forced herself to work on her sewing, and when she woke in the middle of the night she read aloud from the dictionary.

People began to give her a wide berth when they saw her coming, even more so than they had before. The seamstress dreaded requesting fittings, since Merida couldn't stay still, sending pins flying every time she moved. She was sure her wedding dress was very pretty, though if asked all she'd be able to say was that it was a pale blue. Her mind was miles away as her mum and the seamstress discussed her clothing; Mum would make better decisions on her behalf than she'd be able to anyway, especially at the present moment.

Where would he be now? Dad's ship had taken him up the west coast; would he come back the same way? Would it just be him and Toothless, or would anyone else come with him? "Fishlegs, perhaps?" She didn't think Stoick would be able to leave behind his duties in Berk to visit, even for his son's wedding. If Fishlegs came, he'd need a place to stay. "Mum, we might need to get some guest rooms ready in case anyone else comes with Hiccup," she said.

Only when she looked at them did she notice that she must have interrupted, judging from the frown on her mother's face. "I beg your pardon," she said, just to be on the safe side.

Elinor sighed and apologized to the seamstress as well. When the woman had left the room, Elinor turned to her daughter. "Merida, really. I realized you're excited, but do try to remember your manners."

"I am sorry, Mum. I'm just so restless and jumpy." She tugged her dress back on and shook her hair out.

"That's understandable. Getting married is a big step. I just hope..."

"What?"

She looked sadly at Merida. "Oh, love, I hope you get to marry the man you really want to. Sometimes I think maybe we shouldn't have encouraged you quite so much. Let you pin all of your hopes on him."

"Let me?" she laughed. "Mum, I don't mean to be rude, but do you think you could have stopped me?"

Elinor chuckled. "I suppose not."

Merida put her hand on her mum's arm and looked her in the eye. "I know you're worried about what will happen if he doesn't come back. I'm worried about it, too. But I have to believe he'll be here. If I didn't, I'd go insane. And if it turns out I'm wrong...my heart will break." She shrugged helplessly. There was no use hiding the truth: the world wouldn't end if he didn't come back, but the light would go out of it for her. That didn't mean she wouldn't do her duty. "But I'll honor the agreement anyway. I'll choose one of the others and marry him."

Her mum's face was pained. "I don't give a toss about the agreement, Merida. I just want you to be happy."

"I know, Mum. I'll be fine." As Elinor put her arms around her, Merida hoped she was right.

20. Chapter 20

The village gathered in the great hall on the night before he left. It didn't seem to Hiccup that all too many of them were that upset that he was leaving, judging by the laughter he heard; but maybe they were just being typical Vikings, hiding what they thought of as weakness and getting a little bit drunk at the slightest provocation. He smiled as a cheer across the room announced that Stoick had beaten yet another challenger at arm-wrestling. He couldn't say he wouldn't miss all of this.

He and Toothless got an early start the next morning. Fishlegs and Stoick had helped him plot the course, down the west side of the island and then across open water for days. The boat was Stoick's gift to him—"his dad had claimed it was his only gift, but it had

been filled with a suspicious amount of things they would need on the journey. It was smaller than the big fully-crewed ships that they took on raids, and modified so that one person could more or less handle it alone. Hiccup had rigged a system of lines to attach to Toothless' saddle; in case there was no wind, the dragon would be able to tow the boat, at least for short distances. Fishlegs had halfheartedly offered to come with them, but Hiccup had refused. Toothless was coming with him; beyond that he couldn't expect anyone else to give up their life here for him.

They stood on the dock under an overcast sky. There was a cool wind blowing that boded well for the journey; with any luck it would keep up and drive them south quickly. "I don't know what we're going to do without you," Fishlegs said.

"Yeah, we'll have to find somebody else to blame all the disasters on," Tuffnut said.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow at Fishlegs. "Good luck. I think you're gonna need it more than I will."

"Tell Merida I said hi," Fishlegs said, thumping Hiccup on the back.

"Thanks for everything, Legs. Come visit soon, okay?" The others gave him less enthusiastic hugs and moved away.

Astrid's smile was tight, but not unkind. "Safe travels, Hiccup."

"Thanks, Astrid. I wishâ€¦" He sighed and dropped his head for a moment. It was probably meant to tease her, but he didn't want their last moments together for who knew how long to be awkward and strained. Not after all they'd been through together.

"What?" she asked warily. Her face was tense when he peeked up.

"Oh, I just wish I could see everybody's faces when you become the next chieftain." He looked up and grinned. And he did wish it, because it was sure to be a memorable sight.

She laughed out a short surprised bark. "I don't know if some of the men here are ready for a female chieftain." But she looked proud, standing straighter now, more than willing to meet the challenge, and he was really sure that he was leaving Berk's future in good hands.

"They'd better get ready, then, because it's going to happen." They grinned at each other and for a moment it was like nothing had happened to come between them, like they were getting ready for their first flight side by side with the whole sky open to them. Then someone hollered a goodbye to him and they remembered that their paths were about to part. Her smile faded.

"Don't be a stranger," she said, punching him lightly on the shoulder. He rolled his eyes and put his arms around her firmly, familiarly, ignoring the way she tensed briefly before bringing up her own arms to embrace him back. He'd miss her and the way she kept him just off-balance, the way she worked so hard to be the best at whatever she set her mind to, the way she rolled her eyes. The way

she'd been part of his life for so many years.

"Take care of them," he murmured. The village, the dragons, all of them—he trusted her to protect them more than almost anyone else.

"I will. I promise."

21. Chapter 21

She knew she shouldn't fidget, but it was impossible not to. On the other side of the doors were her suitors, whoever and however many they were; how could she be calm knowing that, and not knowing who was out there? She was fairly certain the three clan heirs would be there. Even if they'd said they didn't want to marry her anymore, their fathers would have made them come anyway, on the off chance that Hiccup didn't make it.

He had to be there. He had to be there, across the hall and in the courtyard, waiting. She'd be able to tell if he wasn't there—she'd be able to feel it somehow. "Open the door," she muttered under her breath. "Just open the door."

Fergus waved and the guards pulled the doors open. Merida took a deep breath. There were the MacGuffins, the young one looking stronger than ever; the Dingwalls—Wee Dingwall had gone through a growth spurt in the past year; the Macintoshes proud and even more painted. It took everything in her not to stand on her toes and look over their heads for a fourth suitor.

Instead she forced herself to focus on the men who'd already entered. The lords' expressions ranged from exasperated to resigned; their sons were smirking with various degrees of intensity. That was odd. Macintosh she would expect to be cocky, but not the others. They looked like they were sharing some secret amongst themselves.

Where was he? Maybe there'd been a storm, or he'd run into the kidnappers. Or pirates! She could save him from pirates, easily, as long as she knew he'd been taken in the first place. Pirates was definitely better than the idea that he didn't want to come.

Then the crowd parted between the MacGuffin and Macintosh clans to allow a black beast to push through. "Toothless," she whispered, suddenly breathless, and he bowed sinuously. If Toothless was there, he had to be there! Unless Toothless was there with some kind of apology. But Toothless couldn't have made it all the way by himself; he would have needed—

Hiccup. He followed in Toothless' wake and stood beside him, one hand on his head. Hiccup bowed and she felt at once both rooted to the spot and ready to fly toward him. When he straightened there was a small grin on his face, though not as confident as the others were. He looked well, healthy. Her heart flipped madly in her chest. If there had ever been any doubt before, there was none now: she would always choose him, him before any other.

Happiness swelled inside her until there was no room for anything else, not even for breath.

* * *

><p>All of the words he'd practiced disappeared when he saw her again. She looked just the same, like it had only been weeks that had passed instead of a year. When their eyes met she bit her lip, obviously trying to remain formal for the sake of propriety and all, but if she felt the way he did then her feet were itching to run forward. The last time he'd seen her she'd been watching a ship take him away; her hair had been blowing in the breeze and there had been tears in her eyes and he'd wanted to swim back to shore to have her in his arms one more time. Now he was afraid that if she didn't laugh she'd explode. He could grin, though; he could look as ridiculously overjoyed as he felt at being in the same room with her again, seeing her eyes crinkle, hearing her voice.<p>

"We bid you welcome," she said, clear and strong. "We are honored by your presence here." She nodded to each of the chieftains in turn: "Lord Dingwall; Lord Macintosh; Lord MacGuffin" she inclined her head, lips twitching, so close to laughter it must have hurt "Hiccup. Your continued interest humbles me, and I thank you for coming. I would like to remind you all of the terms of the agreement made a year ago."

"We remember the terms, lass," Lord Macintosh interrupted, kindly enough.

"Aye," said Lord MacGuffin, "so if Your Highness would hurry along and announce your intended, we could all have a drink."

"That way this trip won't be a complete waste," muttered Lord Dingwall. His son rolled his eyes.

"As you wish, my lords." She stepped down and walked with agonizing slowness. His expression went still; he wouldn't be able to believe it until she was in front of him, speaking to him. She stopped and curtseyed before him.

"My lord," she began, looking down demurely, voice carefully controlled, but then she raised her head. Her eyes were wide and bluer than he remembered, a blue that made him feel like he was soaring and drowning at the same time. A faint flush spread across her cheeks as he stared. It was agonizing being so close and not at least taking her hand.

Surely there was supposed to be some formula, some set phrases to ask, but whatever proper thing she was supposed to say became "Hiccup. I chose you a long time ago. Do you still want me?" Her hands twisted together in front of her, like she was worried about his answer.

He grinned, slow and mischievous. "Do you think I came all this way to say no?"

Ceremony or not, she rolled her eyes. "Well, of course not, you numpty, but I had to ask. So that's a yes then?"

Ceremony or not, he pulled her close and kissed her, smiling against her lips as she threw her arms around his neck.

22. Chapter 22

It took a few exaggerated coughs from the king before they broke apart. Hiccup knew his face was pink, though embarrassment was the last thing he felt. A servant brought out a tray on which sat a wooden cup with two flat handles, and Fergus drank from it before offering it to Hiccup. He had to drop Merida's hand to take the cup in both hands; when he drank he almost choked, not expecting the liquid to burn its way down his throat. This felt symbolic and weighty, from the way everyone was watching keenly, and he was glad he hadn't done anything to ruin the moment. Once he'd placed the cup back on the tray Fergus announced something to the crowd that Hiccup was fairly sure was about Merida's choice and the wedding happening the next day. His suspicions were confirmed when she took his hand again and said, with a face radiantly happy, "Tomorrow."

All around them servants were handing out cups for a toast, but he didn't need another drink, not when she was there, her fingers tight around his and her eyes brimming with tears. "Hey," he said softly, wiping away the tear that spilled down her cheek, "it's okay."

"I am happy with you," she said, smiling even as more tears escaped. He would have kissed her again if her dad hadn't been right there, clearing his throat loudly.

Fergus raised his cup into the air. "To the princess and her intended husband. May their lives together be filled with peace and plenty. Merida and Hiccup."

"Merida and Hiccup," they all chorused before draining their cups.

No sooner had he lowered his than Hiccup was surrounded by the grinning young lords. Macintosh threw an arm around his neck and MacGuffin patted him firmly on the back, a combination that threatened to separate his head from his shoulders. They started to lead him away—of course there'd be some kind of traditional hazing before the wedding, but he'd been hoping to get to talk to Merida a bit, or at least sit next to her at dinner. From the looks of it he was going to have to enjoy the company of his former rivals on his last night as a bachelor.

"Wait!" Merida cried behind him. They turned to look at her, but she was in front of her mother, hands on her arms, pleading. Elinor looked torn, glancing past her daughter as Macintosh released him from the headlock. Finally she nodded.

"Hiccup, _koma_." Lord Dingwall protested, but she held up a hand. "Five minutes, my lords, for pity's sake."

Merida caught his hand again and the queen preceded them to the kitchens, where she pushed open the pantry door. "Thank you, Mum," Merida said, pulling him into the small room.

Behind them the door closed, though not completely, leaving a sliver of light by which he could see her face. It was a good face, eyes all bright with excitement and teeth biting her lower lip, and he knew time was rushing away from them but after a year without seeing her he could be excused for staring wordlessly. When her hand stole up to its place over his heart something clicked into place inside him and

for once he knew exactly what to say without having to think.

"_M' annsachd_," he breathed, and if he'd thought she looked beautifully happy before it had nothing on this new look. He only saw it for a split second, though, before she surged forward into him and kissed him with an intensity that took his breath away. He let himself get carried away, heedless of her mother waiting just outside and the crowd of clansmen in the great hall. Everything was distilled to her lips against his, her fingers stroking the back of his neck, her hip under his hand, her hair tangling around his fingers. They didn't stop when the door opened, and it took both Wee Dingwall and Young Macintosh to drag him away as Merida giggled.

* * *

><p>Note:

On the Proz forum, user kmtext writes, "'M' annsachd" is usually translated as "my beloved", but that doesn't go quite far enough. Annsachd is more like the sense of joy or happiness you feel when you catch sight of your lover for the first time after being apart."

23. Chapter 23

Only two more left after this chapter!

* * *

><p>The young lords took him to what appeared to be an empty barn, lit with lanterns and well-supplied with drink. Fergus and the triplets were already there; when MacGuffin pushed Hiccup into a seat the king explained some of what would happen the next day. From that time until the ceremony he wouldn't get to see Merida; if he was asked to prove himself in any way he would have to do so. He was also supposed to choose someone to be his right-hand man, to stand by him and help him protect his bride, if necessary.<p>

"Toothless?" he asked, not feeling hopeful about his chancesâ€"this was shaping up to be the sword hunt all over again.

Fergus paused, mouth open as he thought over the idea. It wouldn't be conventional, but Toothless was his best friend, and if his dad couldn't be there, there was no one else he'd rather have by his side. After a moment Fergus shrugged helplessly. "I'll ask Elinor," he said, and Hiccup nodded. Having a dragon as part of the wedding party might be a little too much.

The king went on to talk about giving a sword to Merida, and Hiccup nodded again. "I have one. It's one of our traditions too. It belonged to one of my ancestors, and when we have a son, she'll give it to him."

When they'd gone over the most important things Fergus took his leave with a warning. "Watch out for the boys, and be careful. If you do anything that will ruin my wee girl's wedding day, I'll kill you all." He smiled a not-particularly-nice smile and left.

Apparently pre-wedding traditions in DunBroch also featured drinking

as a main event. The men assembled told jokes and sang; he could only assume that much of it was crude, since it was impossible to page though the dictionary fast enough to keep up. Hiccup sipped his drink slowly. He'd never been much of a drinker and he didn't imagine that the day before his wedding was a good time to pick up the habit.

He arm-wrestled all the heirs, beating Dingwall and putting up a good fight against Macintosh before losing quickly to MacGuffin. Macintosh tried to teach him how to dance as the rest of the men sang; MacGuffin started to explain the feats of strength that they competed in and then they all trooped outside to watch him throw a full sack of grain well over the eaves of the barn. The moon was nearly full over the lake, and once they were outside it was no surprise when one of the triplets took off running for the water, stripping off his kilt and whooping. The rest followed, Hiccup swept along with them. It took him longer to get out of his clothes, but at least they waited until he was undressed before they chucked him into the water. Even if it was summer, the lake was cold. It didn't seem to bother the others, so maybe he just hadn't had enough to drink yet.

From one of the hills over the lake there suddenly shot a wave of blue flame. The men shouted in fear as the triplets cheered and Hiccup laughed. Toothless lit the sky with burst after burst until his fire surpassed the moon's brightness. The night had been free of dragon-related mischief so far, but now it was worthy to equal a Viking celebration. Now it felt like home.

When they returned to the barn he downed a cup of ale, and though he wrinkled his nose at the taste, it did help warm him. "Tell us a story," Dingwall demanded. He'd had as much to drink as any of them, but he seemed more alert than usual. The triplets crowded around Hiccup to listen, and he told them all the story he'd practiced time after time, the one about finding Toothless and then losing his leg. They were an almost perfect audience, mellow enough not to mind if he made mistakes or to interrupt much. He spoke carefully, letting them correct his pronunciation or grammar where it was necessary. By the end of it almost everyone was settled down in the straw, and many of them were already snoring.

Probably just as well that Toothless waited until then to come in, eyes shining in the darkness as he made his way to where Hiccup sat with triplets sprawled around him. "I'm glad you're here, bud," he whispered, and the dragon purred in response, lying down in an empty spot. Hiccup curled up next to him and slept soundly.

* * *

><p>Some of the younger serving girls sat with Merida, giggling. They were peeling apples and tossing the strips of peel over their shoulders; the peel was supposed to land in the first letter of the name of the man you'd marry. When Merida made to toss her peel, Brighid stopped her.<p>

"Wait, Princess! What if it doesn't make the right letter?"

"Then I suppose I'd have to marry someone else with the proper name." She shrugged.

At the girl's horrified look she laughed. "I didn't let the queen nor the king nor any of the chieftains tell me who I ought to marry.

D'you think I'd listen to a bit of fruit? I'm marrying Hiccup tomorrow, by hook or by crook." Brighid still looked distraught, though, so Merida popped the peel in her mouth.

"Do you love him very much, Your Highness?" Kirstie asked shyly.

"I suppose I do," she said, slicing off a piece of apple. "He's hard not to love."

"When did you know?"

It was a question she'd pondered many times without arriving at a definite answer. There hadn't been one moment when she'd looked at him and known; it had been a slow slide that she couldn't have stopped even if she'd wanted to. But among all the moments when he'd amazed her or made her heart flip or done something to show how much he cared for her there was one that stood out. Even the memory of it—the stillness of the forest, the expression on his face with the firelight dancing on it, the beat of his heart under her hand—filled her with a warm glow. She looked down into her lap, smiling shyly.

"He drew a picture of me once and I looked beautiful, much more than I am, and I felt...unworthy. He's wonderful, and I don't deserve someone like him thinking so well of me. When I saw that picture I nearly kissed him right then and there."

"Why didn't you? What stopped you?"

"Imagining the look on my mother's face stopped me. A princess does not make such advances," she said primly, before winking at the girls. They didn't need to know that she certainly had made such advances.

"You're lucky, Highness," Laura said. "He isn't half handsome, is he?"

"I think so."

"Are all the lads so good-looking where he comes from?"

She chuckled. "Not at all. He's rare in more ways than one." A thought came to her and she leaned close to the others. "Did you know, in Berk the girls wear a kind of trousers, too?"

To her delight the girls gasped in shock. "Isn't it shameful?" Brighid asked, a horrified expression on her face.

"And uncomfortable?" Kirstie added.

"Not at all. It's practical and warm and easier to ride in than skirts." Merida jumped up and rummaged through the chest at the foot of her bed. Most of her things had been taken to the new house already, but she was sure the things from Stoick were carefully tucked away here. "Aha!" She held up the brown leggings to a chorus of _ooh_s.

"Put them on, milady, please," Laura begged. Merida obliged, pulling off her dress and tugging the leggings on under her shift. Then she turned back to the chest and found the skirt and the remaining tunic

to finish dressing.

When she faced them again, hands on her hips, she felt like not just the princess, the bride-to-be, her father's darling and Hiccup's prize, but like Fishlegs' friend and Stoick's future daughter-in-law. She felt like the girl—the young woman—who'd walked the islands, who'd hunted side by side with a dragon, who'd escaped her kidnappers and spit at their feet in disdain. She felt free and strong and finally ready.

24. Chapter 24

There was no chance for a leisurely morning; when he woke the others were already bustling around the barn. Some of them were building a fire, while others dragged a metal tub out of one corner, and a few were passing around small flat cakes. Toothless lit the pile of kindling, and they started to heat water over the fire. From out of bags they produced soap and combs and a somewhat frightening razor, and Hiccup resigned himself to not being allowed to bathe in peace. Once the tub was full he undressed and then stooped to remove his leg. There didn't seem to be a stool anywhere, but one of the triplets stood by and let Hiccup lean his weight on his head.

Just like before he scrubbed until the boys decided he was clean enough; then Dingwall took the razor and shaved him. It was probably the most terrifying thing he'd ever experienced. Macintosh, MacGuffin, and Toothless all watched carefully, which didn't really help matters. He closed his eyes and tried to forget that the most absentminded person he'd ever seen had a sharp blade very near his throat. When it was all over and his face was smooth and his neck still unslit he sighed with relief.

The triplets dressed him again—Fergus had showed him how, but it'd been over a year since then, and he didn't mind the help. This time he wore a fine white shirt with laces at the neck, and the fabric they brought out wasn't the same that he'd worn before. It wasn't the same as anyone's; it was forest green and black, crisscrossed with thin lines of blues and red. "Whose is this?" he asked.

"It's yours," Macintosh said. "The princess designed it for you."

He saw it all, then: Toothless and the streak of his tail, the countless trees between Berk and DunBroch, sea and sky and the blue of her eyes. It was his life in a woolen pattern. She'd given him an identity of his own here.

When he was dressed they brought him the sword and he buckled it to the belt. All the things he'd brought were in one corner of the barn, and with a little work he got some of the men to carry the chests of presents up to the castle.

"Ready, bud?" he asked Toothless. Toothless nodded and then rested his head on Hiccup's shoulder. Hiccup put his arms around the dragon's neck and closed his eyes. "Thank you, Toothless," he said quietly. "If it wasn't for you, none of this would be possible. I wouldn't have met Merida, and we wouldn't be getting married. I'm glad you're here. I wouldn't want to do this without you—I don't think I could do this without you."

Toothless huffed and gently butted his head against the side of Hiccup's. Then he backed away and looked at him, alert and determined. Hiccup straightened his shirt and turned to face the castle, Toothless at his side, where he belonged. "Right. Let's do this."

* * *

><p>Part of her didn't care one bit what she looked like if it meant they could get to the ceremony faster, but part of her wanted to look her best so that maybe his mouth would drop open when he saw her. She squirmed as Brighid pulled the laces tight and as Kirstie brushed out her hair, and she didn't stop squirming until they stopped fussing over her and her mother stood in the doorway.<p>

"Are you ready?"

"I am." She took one last look around her room and clasped the hand her mum held out to her.

Her dad and the lords waited at the door to the great hall. Her mum gave her hand to Fergus, and they stood to wait for the men to arrive. She heard them coming, the stamping of feet and then the bagpipes as they passed through the gate into the castle, and her pulse leapt.

He was the first into the courtyard, with Toothless at his right hand and the three heirs close behind, followed by her brothers and men bearing chests. The sight of him approaching, in the tartan she'd had made for him and with his eyes fixed on her, gave her goosebumps. He and Toothless bowed as behind them the men set the chests down.

Merida couldn't help but be curious about what he'd brought; normally men offered sheep or cows, or gold and silver if they were noblemen, but he couldn't have brought animals all the way from Berk, and she doubted he would merely bring coin and call it good. Though she didn't want to feel bought, it was important that his gifts made a favorable impression on the clan chieftains.

He opened one of the chests and brought forth a huge ax, double-headed and wickedly sharp. "King Fergus," he said, presenting the weapon. Her dad took it with undisguised admiration, and the lords peered around him to get a good look at it as Hiccup returned to the box and removed a lantern. Even from a distance she could tell it was a balance of elegance and usefulness. "Queen Elinor." Her mum smiled at him as she accepted the gift. "Hubert, Harris, Hamish," he called, and the boys ran forward. To each one he handed a leather satchel, and they set about inspecting the contents. Then, at last, he looked at her with a crooked smile.

The pots, some copper and some iron, he displayed next to the chests, with the brightly-polished goblet, the eating knife and spoon, a belt and a longer saddle for Toothless, clearly made to seat two, the round shield. She would bet anything in the kingdom that he'd made it all himself. The shield caught her attention the most; it looked to be the perfect size for her, stout but not too heavy, and was intricately painted with knotwork as good as any designed in DunBroch.

The next gift was neither lovely nor functional: an iron ring from which keys dangled, sturdy and plain. He stood in front of her, their hands brushing as they both held the ring. He indicated one key. "The great hall," he said before selecting another key and then a third. "Stoick's house. The arena." It didn't matter that the keys were to things far away, that she might never use them; it was the symbolism that counted. She would be mistress of all he had, of his home wherever it may be.

Then he handed over a small bag. "From Stoick," he said quietly. Inside was a necklace, a swirl of a dragon in silver, and a short note in hesitant characters.

No parent wants to give up their child, but I'd rather give him up to you than anyone else. Take care of him. You are always welcome in Berk, and I will greet you as not only a guest and a friend but as a beloved daughter.

Tears welled up in her eyes. It was another reminder of how much he'd given up—how much Stoick and Fishlegs and Toothless and all of Berk had given up for them. She wouldn't forget. _Our life together will be worthy of the sacrifice_, she swore to herself. She held the necklace out to him with one hand and with the other lifted her hair from her neck, and he undid the chain's clasp and fastened it at the back of her neck, his fingertips warm as they dragged deliberately against her skin. She huffed to try to hide her shiver, and he chuckled. She carefully smoothed her hair and dropped her hand, or tried to; he caught it and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Away with you, you cheeky lad," she muttered, though she couldn't muster much conviction behind the words, not when she was trying to stop herself from leaping into his arms.

He stepped back, smirking wickedly, and drew the sword at his side. Hiccup dropped to one knee to offer it to her hilt-first. The blade was clean and polished, but undoubtedly old. It wasn't a sword anyone here had lent him—the hilt, the pommel, all of it was different. And if she wasn't wrong there was something in his language on the blade, just below the crosspiece. There was nothing in all of it that the lords could object to: even if he hadn't stuck strictly to tradition he'd made it clear that he could arm, defend, and provide for his family. She took the sword and automatically shifted her grip on it, weighing it, before her mum cleared her throat. Merida handed her the sword a little sheepishly as Fergus motioned for Hiccup to step forward.

They stood facing each other, hands clasped between them. Her dad raised his voice. "Queen Elinor, have you any objection to the marriage of these two?"

She smiled at them. "No, Your Majesty."

"Lord Macintosh, Lord Dingwall, Lord MacGuffin, have any of you objection?"

"No, my lord," they answered, only slightly begrudgingly.

Fergus turned to Merida then. "Is it your will and desire to marry this man?"

"Yes, it is."

Hiccup let out a breath, smiling lopsidedly as Fergus asked, "Is it your will and desire to marry this woman?"

"It definitely is," he said; then, at the chieftains' confused looks, he repeated the words she'd said.

"Ring, Hiccup," Fergus directed, and he pulled the one of the shirt-laces free. A gold band was tied to the end. He slid the ring onto her finger. Fergus had said now would be the time to make his vows, so he took a deep breath. He'd prefer to say some of these things in private, but it seemed important that everyone hear what he said.

"I pledge to you my love and duty. I promise to stand by you, no matter what comes, and to protect, serve, honor, and adore you until my last breath."

The ring felt strange on her hand, but she didn't have time to think about it as she pulled his ring from her thumb. She hoped it would fit—it would be dreadful if it didn't, but she'd had to do her best guessing the size, with only the memory of how their hands fit together as a guide. Her voice was strong and almost fierce as she spoke. "I vow my loyalty to you, my chosen husband. I will honor you, uphold you, serve you, and love you with everything I have, body and soul, until my death."

While their hands were still clasped, Fergus wrapped them round with a length of cloth, half of it the DunBroch tartan and half the new Berk tartan. In a distinctly choked voice the king said, "These two have exchanged rings and promises. Before all you here, I declare they are husband and wife. Let them seal their bond with a kiss."

"Finally," Hiccup murmured, closing the gap between them. Merida met him eagerly, and the courtyard rang with the cheers of the crowd.

25. Chapter 25

Bagpipes played as behind them the doors to the great hall were flung open. Hand in hand and breathless they stepped into the hall for the feast and made their way to the top table. When everyone was assembled a servant brought another drink on a tray, in the goblet he'd made. Merida handed it to him and he drank cautiously, though the liquor today was sweet. He didn't care if he spilled it all over himself; he wasn't going to take his eyes off hers. She drank too, then set the cup on the table and threw herself at him, her lips and tongue tasting of honey wine. The delighted hoots of the guests did little to discourage her.

One arm wrapped around her waist and the other cupping the back of her head, he wasn't sure why he was so surprised to find himself married to her. The first time he'd put his arm around her had been to keep her from falling, at their beginning on the dock in Berk, but she'd pulled him with her ever since. Looking back, there'd been no chance that he wouldn't fall, not to her. The only real surprise was that this defiant, vibrant, gentle girl—woman—loved him back. He laughed when he remembered Stoick's concerns about them traveling

alone together; his dad had seen it before he'd realized it himself.

Merida pulled back just enough to say, "What?" and he grinned.

"_Tha gaol agam ort_." That earned him another kiss.

If he'd thought her homecoming feast had been joyous, it was nothing compared to this one. There were toasts to the couple and songs that everyone knew. When it was time to dance he did his best to follow her lead, though he'd never be a good dancer. Then the king and queen joined them for a set. He danced more that evening than he had in his entire life, none of them there minding in the slightest when he stumbled, laughing.

Merida caught his hand as he returned from being talked at by the chieftains. He hadn't understood most of it, but it had seemed friendly enough. "I want to go home," she said, looking him in the eye, and bit her lip.

Home. From now on home meant wherever she was. He wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep, but they hadn't been alone, really alone, since he'd arrived. He could do with some peace and quiet and the chance to talk.

Or not talk, maybe. The idea was scary and thrilling all at once.

Hiccup popped out of his seat and pulled her up, and everyone's attention turned to them. No chance of slipping out unnoticed. "Thank you all," he said. "Um, we're going to go now." Maybe they would just let them go in peace...

They all stood, though, and he sighed a little. The triplets, armed with pots and spoons to bang on them with, led the way out of the hall, and men lit torches. At the door Elinor and Fergus stopped. Fergus squeezed Hiccup's shoulder as Elinor embraced Merida. Then the queen reached out and pulled Hiccup to her, enfolding both of them in her arms. Her eyes were misty when she released them. Merida hugged her dad. "Goodbye, darling," he said, letting her go with eyes full of tears and pulling his wife close to his side.

Merida rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Good night, Mum, Dad. We'll see you soon."

The party, mostly some of the young men and a few female servants, trooped through the night, singing as they went, led by the triplets and with Toothless bringing up the rear. Hiccup had no actual idea where they were going, though the path was clear, especially with the full moon overhead. Merida held tight to his hand as the boys yodeled ahead of them, worse than any bagpipes.

They finally reached a farmhouse with a thatched roof, whitewashed stone walls gleaming in the dark. The triplets stopped at the door and one of them produced a key. "Thank you, Harris," Merida said, taking the key and handing it to Hiccup.

He twisted the key in the lock and pushed the door open, then turned to her. Before she had time to tell him what to do he swept her up, one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees, and the

crowd cheered. "Your dress weighs a ton," he grumbled, trying to keep a steady hold on the slick fabric.

Merida grinned and spoke into his ear. "It won't for long," she teased, and though she couldn't see his face she could easily imagine his expression.

With great care he carried her into the house—their_ house. She kissed him on the cheek before he set her down in the middle of the room. Outside the boys were still banging on their pots and the others were hollering, calling out for a proper kiss. She turned to Hiccup to translate, but apparently he understood just fine, as he suddenly dipped her low and pressed a searing kiss to her lips. All she could do was hang on, her arms around his neck, neither of them caring about the hooting crowd outside. When he broke the kiss he dropped his forehead against hers and smiled, so blissfully that she had to kiss him once more.

Once she was upright Merida walked to the door. "Good night," she said pointedly to the revelers outside, ignoring their laughter. "Toothless, make sure these three get home, please." Hiccup waved over her shoulder and called good night to the dragon as she poked her tongue out at her brothers one last time before swinging the door shut and locking it.

Hiccup looked around the house as the noise outside died away. His things were already stacked haphazardly in one corner of the main room, along with the gifts he'd brought; there was a table and chairs, a comfy-looking couch not far from the hearth, the kitchen barely visible through one dark doorway and what had to be the bedroom through another. He felt Merida watching him as he turned. The house wasn't as big as the castle or the one back in Berk, but it was big enough for the two of them and Toothless. (He could live with any guilt he felt about Toothless finding somewhere else to stay for the night, or the next couple of nights.) He turned to look at her, his wife, and felt so happy that it made him dizzy.

He went to one of the chests in the corner and rifled through it, clearly looking for something, though she didn't know what. When he crossed the room to her he held a wooden box in his hands. "This is supposed to be your morning gift—that's a Viking tradition, the husband gives his wife a present in the morning."

"Every morning?" she teased. "I like that tradition."

"No, just the first morning, after they've..." He trailed off, either unwilling or unable to finish the sentence.

Aha. She looked at him with hooded eyes. "And what present do you get?"

He kissed her soundly; either that was the answer, or it was a ploy to avoid answering any more embarrassing questions. In any case it worked wonders, until the box he still held reminded him of what they'd been talking about. "But I want to give it to you now. Just because." He smiled lopsidedly and her heart stuttered. Had anyone ever died of happiness, or would she be the first?

Her name was carved on the top, surrounded by flowering vines. She flipped the little catch and opened the box; inside were combs,

carved of wood and sanded smooth, one with teeth set wide, the next narrower, and the third finely set. They were beautiful. He was watching, expectant and hopeful, and she wasn't sure she could ever put into words how lucky she was that it was him who'd found her, asleep and cold and with her hair spilling out of her hood. She wanted to thank everyone who'd made him who he was, everyone who'd allowed them to meet, everyone who'd agreed to let them be togetherâ€”a lot of thank-you notes suddenly loomed in her future, but the cramped and ink-stained hand would be worth it. Now that he was here, and hers, she couldn't wait for tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that, for all of the adventures they would have together.

But right now he was waiting for her to react. She stared at the combs, trying to remember the right word. There'd been more than one, and she wanted to use the proper one; then she looked into his warm eyes and knew he wouldn't care. " _ _ ÅžÇ«kk, minn munuÃ°, " she said.

"You're welcome. But, um, that last word means...physical love. Um, pleasure." Being married wasn't an automatic cure for blushing, given the color of his face.

So it hadn't come out quite as romantic as she'd meant it to be. She had plenty of time to learnâ€”they had the rest of their lives together to learn.

"You are that as well. Or you will be." And she took his hand, and led him through their home,

and they lived happily ever after.

* * *

><p>Notes:

Tha gaol agam ort.=I love you.

__ÄžÇ«kk, minn munuÄ°_.=Thank you, my pleasure/physical love.

End
file.